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# THE NEAR AND THE FAR





# THE NEAR AND THE FAR

by

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## PREFACE

THIS is not a historical novel, although the action is placed in the time of Akbar the Great Mogul (who was a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth's), nor is it an attempt to portray specifically oriental modes of living and thinking. I have done what I liked with history and geography; facts have been used when they were useful, and distorted or ignored when they were inconvenient. Only four of my characters bear the names of real people: the Emperor Akbar; his sons, the Princes Salim and Daniyal; and Shaik Mobarek, his spiritual adviser. Moreover, of these the only personage drawn with any regard for the truth is the Emperor. The things told of Akbar are, I believe, in the main true.

And now I want to explain why I have chosen as my scene India at the end of the sixteenth century. *The Tale of Genji* has shown us that ways of thought and feeling that we have been accustomed to regard as characteristically modern, were in fact paralleled at the Antipodes nine hundred years ago. The novelist has thus been granted a new licence. He may now ask his readers to accept a juxtaposition of things that would have struck them as disconcertingly anachronistic before Lady Murasaki's writings had opened our eyes. Our novelist, then, taking flight from the topical, escaping from the local and particular, leaving behind all the irrelevant associations that hold to name and place and actuality, can now carry along with him

and implant under alien skies, the habits of mind, the perceptions, the modes of sensibility, that are familiar to us in Western Europe to-day. What a happy relief from the exercise of dodging undesired associations! He can take just what he wants and leave behind just what he doesn't want.

This, then, is why I fly abroad. But I am aware that it is dangerous to fly too far. The story-teller who soars out of our earthy geography and history altogether starts with too great an emptiness before him. He has to recreate everything, to tell you everything from the beginning; it cannot be taken for granted that in his superlunary world the sky is still blue, the grass still green. Such excessive freedom is onerous to him and tiresome to you.

But take India in the reign of Akbar, the great Mogul: - enough, and not too much, is at once outlined on the blank canvas. You see, I imagine, a vague picture of emperors on splendidly caparisoned elephants, white marble palaces, palm trees and so on - nothing very precise but plenty of fine confused colouring for a background. And that is excellent. Your comfortable, normal ignorance is what I count upon. It supplies all that is necessary; the rest is my affair.

And now, I suppose, my last word ought to be a confession of my many plagiarisms. But this I am going to shirk. To give a list of great names would look pretentious; it would invite the sarcastic comment that I have not turned my reading to any great account.

HAYWARD'S HEATH,  
SUSSEX,

L. H. M.

*September 1929.*

# THE NEAR AND THE FAR



LITTLE Prince Jali stepped on to the balcony and looked down upon the plain in awe. It was true that from the tower of his father's palace at home there was an even wider view; but that view was familiar, this one was full of mystery. The wall of this strange palace went down and down, until it merged into the sweeping side of the fort; the fort itself crowned the summit of a hill; and the bare rock of the hill continued a precipitous descent down into the River Jumna. The red glitter of sunset lay upon the river; across the water shady groves alternated with sun-swept patches of millet and corn; beyond stretched the desert.

For the last two years of his life – and he was now twelve – the desert had held Jali under a spell. Nearly every evening at home he would climb up into the tower to gaze upon it. Beyond the roofs, beyond the green of irrigated fields, beyond the glistening palms and the dark clumps of citron, cypress, and mango – beyond the little world that he knew there stretched that other world which his eye alone could reach. There it lay, a playground for the winds, a floor for the light of evening to flow along, the home of mirage and coloured airs.

It was a region that seemed to promise him a disembodied nimbleness, an unearthly freedom. Its very boundaries were unsubstantial – lines of hills pencilled so lightly along the horizon that noonday melted them



into the white-hot sky. Only at sunset did those hills become real. Then it was that they emerged, serenely yet with melancholy, out of nothingness into beauty. Cliffs, battlements, ranges, then took on a substance just solid enough to catch the tints of gold and rose that streamed through the air. The watery glitter of mirage was withdrawn from about their feet. They gave, in their remoteness, a measure of the desolate space in between. But this lasted for a few minutes only. Swiftly rising, the dusk submerged them, and what had been hidden day-long under the glare from above was now drowned in a darkness from underneath. Night rolled across the plain, sharp stars pricked the blue; in a moment nothing was left but the twin darknesses of earth and sky.

For the last six days Jali had been travelling over the desert and disappointment had befallen him – disappointment, but not disillusion. He clung to the truth of appearances as something equal to the truth of what underlay them. There were two deserts: one that was a glory for the eye, another that it was weariness to trudge. Deep in his heart he cherished the belief that some day the near and the far would meet. Yes, one day he would be vigorous enough in breath and stride to capture the promise of the horizon. Then, instead of crawling like an insect on a little patch of brown sand, swift as a deer he would speed across the filmy leagues; the wind would be singing in his ears, the blood tingling in his veins, his whole body would be a living arrow. Almost, already, in his imagination he could foretaste that joy – of seizing in his grasp, of clasping to his heart, the magic of things seen afar. To fling himself into the distance in one bound, to flash into the

visionary scene before it had had time to transform itself – almost he knew how!

Now, however, leaning against the warm marble of the balustrade, he was staring before him dejectedly. And soon the voice of his nurse sounded in the room behind, calling him in to the terrors of a lonely night in a strange room in a vast and shadowy palace. Obeying, he went and stretched himself out upon his couch, and even closed his eyes. She asked if he had said his prayers, and then left him.

Alone, he gave a sigh. His life, alas! was much less simple than she or anyone else supposed. He was a Christian, yes; but those simple prayers to the simple Christian God did not satisfy him. There were other deities, less gentle. The most exacting he had discovered for himself. It had to be served with secret propitiatory rites. For instance, before going to sleep he had to touch with each of his five fingers each of the four walls of his room, and it was necessary to count up to five each time. This ceremony had to be repeated three times, nor could he allow his attention to stray for a single instant, otherwise sleep would be banished by the fear that he had made a slip. The business was so unpleasant that he always put it off as long as he could. A few minutes after his nurse had gone he got up and returned to the balcony.

There, what at once caught and fixed his attention was a kite balancing in strained immobility, immensely high in the blue. What was the kite thinking about? What held it, motionless and intent, in that particular place? Beneath was the palace with its courts and terraces, a maze of buildings encircled by the prodigious walls of the fort. In a wider circle lay

the thronged and intricate city; and beyond the city stretched the plain – enormous, with the Jumna flowing across it, a shining red streak that passed from one veiled distance into another.

Was the kite solitary and speculative as he was, or did its affairs engross it as they engrossed ordinary men? Did the kite notice upon a certain balcony a small boy who was lamentably separate? No, of course to the kite he would not seem to be separate. The loneliness of being the only specimen of oneself was a part of one's own particular secret. Not even one's father or mother could guess it. But often it made him long to fling himself into his mother's arms with the cry: 'Let us fly together! Let us die together!' But fly whither? and die into what?

Fascinated by the kite he remained unaware that his father had come into the room. The Rajah stood in the glow that poured in through the balcony arch, a glow that was not the direct light of the sun, but a reflection from flooding redness outside. It put a flush upon his white tunic and touched with a faint glitter his only ornaments, a jewelled sword-belt and the aigrette clasp on his turban.

Several minutes went by while Rajah Amar continued to gaze upon his son in meditation; what finally distracted him was the sound of steps in the corridor, and the next moment the curtains at the end of the room parted and the Ranee appeared. Standing still upon the threshold, she let her eyes wander about her. The long, narrow room was already dim; but the white marble of its walls distributed what light there was, making visible the delicate floral inlay of agate, onyx, and lapis lazuli, that ran up the doorway and

spread across the vaulted ceiling. In this setting, in this dusk that had warmth and transparency, her loveliness was really extraordinary; the Rajah's smile, rapt, tender, and remote, rested upon her as if she were a figure in some pictured scene. The dress she wore was rose-coloured, with a fringe of silver, and a veil of pale lilac draped her head and shoulders. Tall and slender, she carried herself with an oriental grace, and yet she was not an Oriental. Her white skin, her dark brown hair that had a ripple in it, proclaimed a Caucasian descent. She was, in fact, the daughter of a Georgian prince, who, exiled, had found a refuge in Persia. There it was that the Rajah had met and married her. It had been the romance of his life and the wonder of it flashed over him now – now in these moments when by some vagary of imagination he found himself gazing at her detachedly with the eyes of a stranger.

At the first sound of her voice, Jali ran in from outside, and presently she took the boy back to his couch. He must be good, she said. He must go to sleep quickly, for he was tired; why, even they were tired after so many long days of travel.

On his bed, Jali lay listening to their lowered voices as they stood talking on the balcony. The sense of their words escaped him, but the sound fixed his mind upon the disquieting world of adult preoccupations. To begin with, this journey. His father was but one of hundreds of rajahs, chieftains, and grandees, who had been summoned by the Emperor to the Durbar. In this great palace he was actually the Emperor's guest. And this, to be sure, was but one among many palaces that Akbar was putting to use as guest-houses – for he

himself was holding court at his new palace-city, Fatehpur-Sikri. The domed and towering outline of that city had been pointed out to him upon the horizon as they were approaching Agra. So many cities! So many palaces! So many noble princes summoned at a word! Grandeur realized upon this scale was inhuman. He had to imagine a world in which even his parents were dwarfed into insignificance. His heart contracted, shrinking before its vision of gigantic, heartless splendours.

After a while the Rajah and Ranee came in again, kissed him upon the forehead, and left him alone for the night. It seemed long ago since the thin, nasal call of the muezzins had floated through the air, but the creak of an occasional ox-cart still rose from the long, powdery roads below, and he could still hear the familiar croaking of the dusty crows preparing to roost. All at once he got up again and slipped out on to the balcony.

A cool breeze was brushing along the palace wall; he noticed it bending a small, wiry plant that grew out of a crack in the masonry below. On the southern or western wall that little plant would have had no chance (not even dry grey lichen could subsist on those scorched surfaces), but here, apparently, it just managed to draw life. Perhaps it was helped by a shallow gutter running along beneath it; perhaps some of its roots spread into the gutter and so could drink deeply whenever rain fell. But all the same, it must be a hard life, and the little plant looked dry enough – and stunted – and, above all, lonely. Jali was sorry for it in its loneliness; he felt the dull weight of the hours, weeks, and months of its solitude. There it would remain all its

days, knowing naught else until it withered and was blown away.

With a sigh he looked farther afield, and his eyes widened as they fell upon something strange. Something was moving slowly and cautiously along the gutter – a snake! Yes, possibly even a cobra! The pale-yellow and brown of the snake's body glistened like a stream of flowing metal. By what mistake had the creature strayed into this unlikely place? Impossible to imagine! Yet there it was; and its slow movements betrayed uneasiness and confusion.

As he watched it his instinctive antipathy melted away. He could understand so well what the snake was feeling. He entered into its cold, narrow intelligence and shared its angry perplexity. Its movements were cramped, its advance difficult, it was in constant danger of slipping over the edge. Now and then it lay still in dull reflection, nursing a cold anger that could find no vent.

Meanwhile, the little plant, bent downwards by every puff of wind, was beating its thin twigs against the gutter like a birch. The snake seemed not to see the plant. It moved forward until a light touch from the twigs fell upon its head. At this it stopped and lifted its neck. The little plant was now doing no more than lightly sway and dip. The snake, its head still reared, flickered its tongue and waited. One could feel the angry heaving and straining in its sluggish brain – the dull, red anger waiting to explode. Then came a strong gust sweeping along the wall, and at once the twigs thrashed down upon that furious head – thrashed down and beat it with a movement that seemed to Jali both comic and dreadful. In a flash the head reared

itself higher, the neck drew back, and there was a lunge at the thin twigs and the empty air. O fatal act! To strike, the snake had been obliged to coil, and its coiled body could not support itself upon the narrow ledge. No recovery was possible; it overbalanced and fell.

Jali leaned breathless over the balustrade and saw and heard the falling body strike upon a small, flat roof about fifty feet below. There the creature began to writhe in agony; it could do no more than twist and turn upon the self-same spot.

Jali was trembling, but beneath this agitation there was a deep, troubled wonder. Here was the little plant now waving with a kind of jaunty cynicism! And there was the writhing snake! He remained staring until the darkness was complete, and it was still in a dream that he felt his way back to bed. His chin upon his drawn-up knees, he stared into the obscurity. The world, unquestionably, was a place of mystery and terror. This was revealed in the writhing of the crippled snake, in the jaunty waving of the innocent plant in the wind, in the bright-eyed intentness of the hovering kite, in the terrible numerousness of living beings, both animal and human, all separate, all alone, all threatened by evil in ambush. The minutes slid past without his notice. He had forgotten everything, even his defensive rites. When next he stirred it was to become aware of night, deep night. He felt it in the quality of the silence – a silence which, when he listened, became alive with soundless activities. Spiritual presences moved. He was surrounded. Gradually he felt his skin tighten, his heart-beats quicken, his eyes dilate. Slipping to the floor, he crept crouching out of the room. Blessed was the moment when the curtain

dropped behind him, and in a corner of the half-lit ante-chamber he perceived his old nurse, curled up asleep. Her serene unconsciousness reassured him; he would not disturb her. Besides, it was not her he wanted. But which was the way to his mother's room? He could not exactly remember.



A LONG, empty corridor lit by small lamps of perfumed oil stretched away into the distance. Stealing down it on bare feet, he passed several doorways hung with silken curtains, and from behind them there came the murmur of women's voices. Excitement carried him on until he stood before an arch which seemed to lead out on to a small roof-terrace. Here he stopped to peep through the screen of woven khas-khas grass that stood across the entrance. The smell of the damped grass roots was delicious; and almost at once a low music of stringed instruments rose on the night air. A group of fine ladies were listening, but, as far as he could make out, his mother was not among them. This, however, was no great matter to him, for his fears were fast giving way to a sense of adventure. It was something new and strange to be thus wandering by night in a vast, unknown palace. He lingered until someone got up and moved towards the screen; whereupon, taking flight, he ran along several corridors and down stairway after stairway until he found himself in an ancient and seemingly unoccupied part of the building. It was solitary here; but, feeling like a ghost himself, he was not afraid. Going further yet, and always in a downward direction, he noticed that the walls were no longer of marble but of old red sandstone. Their surface, polished by the touch of countless hands, the floor, too, worn by generations of passing

feet, informed him that he was now in the substructure, the ancient palace over which the new one had been built. A further descent would carry him, he supposed, down into the living rock of the citadel; he would find himself at last in that underground labyrinth of which he had heard speak – a region that excited a curiosity which he dared not satisfy. Indeed, a shiver passed over him when all at once he heard, or rather felt, a deep vibration rising from the stone floor beneath his very feet. It took him a moment to realize that this was merely the trumpeting of elephants stabled in some cavern below. He had heard the same sound coming up from the rock chambers beneath his own palace at home. And now, as then, it brought before his mind the scene as he had occasionally witnessed it – the great grey hulks of the elephants, the glistening brown bodies of the men, a confusion of living forms which the smoky glare of the torches could only half illuminate. He imagined the pungent stable smell, sudden outbreaks of sound that flurried one out of one's senses, and the constant dread of being crushed to death.

Turning, he retraced his steps. He was walking faster now, and presently he began to walk faster still, for he had caught the sound of footfalls behind. Luckily, the passage had so many turnings that he was able to keep out of sight of his follower. He refrained from running, but it was only from the fear lest those feet behind should break into a run too. Panic was threatening him when all at once he remembered that a little further on there was a recess where he would be able to hide. Yes; here it was – with a massive pillar in front, which was very convenient. The paintings

on the wall showed that this had once been a shrine to Ganpati. The god of luck! he reflected, as he crouched in the shadow cast by a small lamp hanging outside.

A few seconds later a figure appeared. It was that of a man of middle height, well built and vigorous, who carried himself along with the swinging stride of the hill-folk. His outline seemed to Jali not unfamiliar, and then, to his astonishment, he realized that this was certainly no stranger. It was none other than his uncle, Hari Khan, the man who had married his father's sister. Hari was a borderland chieftain; he lived in the north among the mountains; a fine man, Jali had always thought, and friendly and amusing. To meet like this was really great fun. 'How about giving him a start!' he chuckled to himself; so out he leapt, all of a sudden, with a waving of his arms.

The effect of the joke was not what it should have been. He expected to see his uncle jump, but a cry of the friendliest surprise should have followed immediately after. Instead of this, Hari simply stopped dead and fixed him with an icy stare. True enough, that stare did not last long – hardly more than a second, in fact; but in that second Jali was disconcerted, and his uncle's exclamations, when they came, could not put matters right. Jali! By all the gods, Jali! Now how on earth did he come there! But the shock of that steely regard lingered and had the effect of reviving in his mind fragments of talk overheard on various occasions at home. He had gathered that his uncle was not altogether approved of, a discovery that heightened his interest, adding spice to his private opinion that Hari

Khan was a man whom one did well to like. Well, now – his thoughts ran – it was odd, very odd, to find Uncle Hari abroad in the women's quarters at this hour. And some reflection of his inward mystification no doubt appeared on his face; at any rate, Hari abruptly stopped questioning and began to smile at him speculatively.

'Supposing we sit down for a few minutes – here, on these steps. I should like to have a talk.'

They seated themselves, and still Jali could not keep his eyes from expressing the nature of his thoughts. His uncle was dressed, as he now observed, in riding costume; he looked dusty and hot; his expression was singularly alert.

'As for me, you know,' Hari explained carelessly, 'I've just arrived from up north. A hard day's ride I've had, my dear, and one of many. A few weeks ago I was hunting goat up in the hills. . . . Yes, that's what I've been doing – all on my way down from Kabul. I come from the mountains, from the snows, and it's many a long mile, I can tell you.'

The sing-song voice and the smile made one uncertain whether to believe him. Hari's blue eyes, too, for all the apparent candour of their gaze, were extraordinarily unrevealing. Nevertheless Jali smiled too, and his heart responded to the comfortable feeling that his uncle's presence always gave him.

During the pause that now came, Hari's thoughts – to judge from that speculative look of his – were sweeping a wide range; and his talk, when he started again, certainly seemed rather rambling. But presently he broke off and began asking all sorts of questions;

and then again he stopped to think. 'So that's how it is . . .' he was now musing aloud, 'you arrived two or three hours before sunset, and you found quite a crowd at the Great Gate. Narsing was there to receive you all; but I suppose –' and he hesitated, 'I suppose anyone really might have slipped in without being noticed? – Yes; and then you were taken up to your rooms. And outside your mother's room, you say there is a terrace – a small terrace overlooking the road by the river. . . . And you tried to fly your kite from that terrace, and one of your mother's serving-maids was with you. Let me see! Which one was it? Zaghul? She is young and pretty, isn't she? Yes, yes, of course I remember her! And do you know, as it happens, I was passing along that road this evening on my way into the town, and I think I caught sight of you and Zaghul leaning together over the terrace wall. . . . What do you think of that?'

'I never saw you,' replied Jali, wondering.

Hari looked away. He was still faintly smiling, and when he turned to Jali again his eyes shone with a secret amusement.

'You can't make me out!' said he.

Jali was silent.

Hari, laughing outright, leant forward and took him by the shoulder. To Jali it was abundantly clear by now that his uncle was alive to the necessity of accounting for himself. Moreover, the significance of his innumerable questions had become pretty plain. He was looking for something – anything – that upon necessity would help him to trump up an explanation of his doings. 'You can't make me out!' he had just said; and those words sounded like the prelude to a confession,

a confidence, an appeal. Jali's heart bounded with excitement.

'My dear,' said Hari, 'why don't you ask me point blank what the devil I am up to?' Amusement and good-humour were twinkling together in his eyes. 'You think I should answer with some lie. Alas! if only I could find a good one!'

'Well, well!' he went on a moment later, 'it is true enough that I have no business here. But this is also true: my only object is to get through into another part of the building without anyone challenging me. I want to get to the Great Terrace, where I shall mingle very respectably with the Emperor's other guests. I also want to see Gokal – you remember Gokal? – I think he is probably there.'

Jali, already an accomplice, thrilled. 'Do you think I can help you? In any case – I suppose you don't want me to speak of this meeting?'

Hari knit his brows. 'I won't ask you to lie, although, to be sure, a lie is easily atoned for by a little offering to Saraswati.'

'You forget,' said Jali, 'I am a Christian.'

'No. I don't forget.'

At this Jali blushed. He was a Christian, certainly, for his mother had brought him up in her faith; but – good heavens! was there any religion in the world of which he was not, more or less, an adherent? If his mother was a Christian, was not his father a Buddhist, his old nurse a Jain, his teacher a Brahmin, and the companions of his play-hours either Moslems or adherents of some variety of Hinduism? The truth was that Jali was ready to acknowledge every known god as well as others of his own imagining.

'After all, you are your father's son,' continued Hari, 'and your father's people have lived in this country for many generations. Men cannot live in this country without becoming what the country wills.'

Jali was troubled. 'Will my mother, then, change?'

'Your mother is an angel,' smiled Hari. 'God forbid that she should change.'

'I don't mind telling lies for you,' said Jali, 'I tell lies for myself.'

Hari shook his head. 'I don't want you to lie. And even to keep secrets is a burden. But if it costs you nothing to be silent, then be silent.'

'I can easily say nothing,' said Jali, after a pause. 'You see, I have secrets all the time.'

His eyes resting upon the boy meditatively, Hari leant back against the wall. Tranquillity had returned to him; indeed, there was nothing in his manner to suggest that the night was not all before them.

'You have not yet told me why you got up to look for your mother. You felt lonely, I suppose?'

Jali admitted it, and a little later, since Hari was the most understanding of all the grown-up people that he knew, he was telling the story of the small plant and the snake. Hari listened with an attention that was not forced; if he failed to grasp the exact nature of the impression made upon Jali's mind, he did not seem puzzled by the fact that an impression had been made. He pondered; he speculated. 'There is too much chance in the world,' he said, 'and yet, you know, chance is what makes life interesting.'

Jali was silent.

'I think life frightens you?' said Hari, smiling.

Jali coloured and still remained silent.

‘Not to be afraid of this world,’ said Hari slowly, ‘you must belong to it.’

‘Ah, but how?’ thought Jali.

‘One can always pretend to oneself that one does,’ Hari went on, looking at him intently. ‘Didn’t I tell you once that in a nightmare the way to escape a pursuing tiger is to turn oneself into one?’

‘Yes.’

‘Pretend to yourself that you are like others,’ said Hari carelessly. ‘Everyone is doing it.’

‘But if everyone is pretending to be like others, who is like himself?’

Hari laughed.

‘There is less evil in the world than you think,’ said he. ‘At least, that is the best line to go on.’

Jali made no reply. What his uncle said was wise and reassuring as far as it went; but what about the evil in the gods? The universe was full of terrifying and destructive forces. There was Kali. . . .

They sat in silence for a time, and in this pause Jali again thrilled to the mystery that enveloped him. To be here, in these soundless vaults, in this depth of night, they two, alone! He pressed his feverish hands against the stone of the step. His gaze rested upon Hari with a dark intensity. That man gave him courage. *His* life, he felt sure, was one long adventure. Well! he, too, would live adventurously. It was a resolve, a sacred vow.

Hari seemed to have gone off into a reverie again, but all at once he gave another little laugh, tapped his companion on the shoulder, and got up. It was time to part, he said. Was Jali ready to go back to bed? Good! A sound sleep, this time, and pleasant dreams!



He stood smiling under the lamp while Jali walked firmly away. The boy's mind was at rest in a sort of exaltation. He found his way back to his room as by a miracle and once in bed fell asleep instantly.

### III

SITA was the name the Rajah had given his wife after their marriage; but she had been christened Helen, and as they stood together on Jali's balcony in the fading light, he mused upon the problem of identity, thinking how, under that name, in her own country, amongst her own people, she would have been – would she not? – someone else. Individuality, identity, selfhood, these words, as Buddha said, stood for what was little more than illusion. People were like clouds – changing, melting, mixing. . . . But was it right to have married her, to have brought her here? Did it appear right now in the light of the decision that he was taking.

Ten years her senior, he felt himself old enough to be her father. If she had the gift of innocence, he had a faculty for experience; and some men, he reflected, are born with the experience of their ancestors already resting somewhat heavily upon them. He could not reproach her, if, after all these years, in spite of their love, they were still, spiritually, wide apart. In his religion, as he well knew, he stood aloof not only from her but from nearly all his contemporaries. Buddhism had all but died out of India, and where it survived its form was debased. Many years of study and meditation had at last brought the Rajah to the belief that he had grasped – and even in a certain sense rediscovered – the doctrine of Buddha in its authentic purity.

Whole-hearted in his rejection of God, the Soul, and Immortality, he had a profound contempt for all corruptions of the original teaching. He condemned the Mahayana as a whole; in his opinion, by shifting the emphasis from self-discipline to altruism, it had entirely falsified Gautama's teaching. Such a concession to human sentiment was disastrous; the truth, in order to be the truth, must be accepted in its entirety. No man could help his fellow save by the force of his example, save by the spectacle of his achieved holiness. The reward of holiness was the bliss of peace, — a bliss that you received in this life, and afterwards — well, afterwards your peace was the peace that passeth all understanding. Such had been the teaching of the Enlightened One; it was the truth; and for those who understood it, it was the happy truth.

Sita had never been able to understand it. But, although this was a disappointment to him, he did not — no, he did not reproach her. After all, she was blessed. As she walked through the world she found beauty there, and that beauty was to her an assurance that life did, indeed, have the meaning she ascribed to it. Wonderful in her, thought Amar, was the constancy of this accompaniment through all the trivialities of daily living. This it was that kept her gaiety so fresh. Not many minutes ago he had been deterred from entering her room by a babble of feminine talk and laughter, and now she was telling him how amusing the gathering had been. Yes, she had always been popular; she knew how to enjoy the fun of the moment; she and those other ladies were still able to laugh at jokes that had been exchanged for the first time

when, as a bride of eighteen, she had arrived in India.

Presently, as they were leaving Jali's room, she besought him to accompany her back to her own apartments. There were some letters to show him, she said; besides, as he well knew, it amused her to overcome his shyness. To his great relief they made their way along the interminable passages without encountering anyone, but, just as he was settling down, the curtains were flung aside and a pretty young woman swept in. Courtly and confused, he at once jumped to his feet. 'It is only my husband!' cried Sita, 'don't run away, my dove!' But the girl, with a light laugh and lowered eyes, fell back and withdrew. Amar looked into his wife's smiling face and knitted his brows reprovingly. She certainly did not know what he knew; that Jagashri Ranees's husband was the most watchfully jealous man in India – and with good reason.

His thoughts taking a new turn, he looked into his heart and pondered. No; thank God, he could find no jealousy there! Many were the seekers after deliverance, who, when they had reached the age to sever worldly and domestic ties, still hung back. Were he jealous, how could he ever leave this wife of his, so young still and so beautiful, to finish her life without him? In thirteen years she had scarcely changed at all. Her face and figure, like her character, had retained a girlish freshness.

With a sigh he looked again at the two letters he had picked out from the rest. The first was from Queen Miriam, Akbar's Christian consort. She invited Sita to attend service in the little chapel that the Emperor had

built for her at Fatehpur-Sikri. Sita would certainly wish to go – and to take Jali with her. But Jali ought not to go; there were political reasons that were obvious; unfortunately, however, Sita would ignore them completely.

The other letter was an invitation from his sister, Ambissa, offering her the coveted distinction of a room in the palace at Fatehpur-Sikri. Of course she ought to accept; but – how bitterly she would cry out against it! The fact was – and the Rajah sighed heavily – she carried unworldliness too far. Life for her remained too simple; she knew but to follow her heart. Not that her head was weak, but it was subject. And while her instinctive charge against him was over-subtlety in the interests of a set philosophic scheme, his against her was that she yielded too easily to the sweeping simplifications of the heart. In vain he reminded her that the children of light were called upon to be as wise as the children of this world; in vain he quoted: ‘Render unto Cæsar . . .’; she would not change her views or her ways.

When he looked up it was to find her eyes fixed questioningly upon him. She was leaning one shoulder against the wall; her head drooped, and he could see that an anticipatory flush of protest had mounted to her cheeks.

He smiled. This pause was charged with memories of long-standing disagreements, nothing ugly, nothing wounding, although sometimes exasperating to both. He could hear her saying: ‘I believe, I really believe, that in your heart you sometimes wish I were worldly and sophisticated! But even if I tried, it would be no good. And I don’t intend to try, for it seems to me that

the worldly life is without depth, without richness, without colour. People who enjoy competing and making a show very soon get to think that nothing else matters.' And, to this, his reply, he could also hear that: his patient, his reasonable, his so often repeated reply.

In this moment his mind was made up. Nevertheless, just to try her, he held up the letters and said: 'Well?'

'Oh,' she murmured, 'you know, without my saying it, what I want. You know, too, what I should simply hate!' and she sighed.

'Yes. I know.'

'And what do you say?'

'I say: Do as you like.'

For several moments after hearing this she looked a little puzzled, a little mistrustful, but gradually a glowing smile of reassurance spread over her face. Her gratitude was altogether delightful, and for the next half-hour, while she was laughing, chatting, and putting order among her things, the Rajah, watching her, had a mind freed from care.

Care returned, however, when he was once more alone. In another wing of the palace, standing before the window in his own room, he looked out at the bats flitting across the stream of his lamp-light, and sadness invaded his heart. Was it his misconception that he understood her better than she him? Or did she really understand him and hide her understanding from herself because it would open her mind to ideas that were antagonistic to her own view of life? Was, therefore, her apparent lack of understanding the evidence of a lack of love? Well; in no case was she to be blamed; perhaps, on the other hand, it was he. . . .

Leaving the window he fell to pacing to and fro. Unquestionably, during the next few weeks, he would have to fight the world with its own weapons. After all, he was a ruler; he had to use statecraft; and without shame he would do it. . . . Diplomacy, finesse, were required in order that his little principality should retain, amidst hungry jealousies, its place and its due. Sita would see him leading a way of life that was distasteful to him and cultivating a society that he despised. But in his own conscience he was justified; and the time for self-explanation – if ever there had been such a time – was past. Nor would he make this the occasion for communicating his great decision – for telling her that her worldly husband with all his worldly activities was engaged in preparing for – what? For the yellow robes of a recluse, and the begging bowl.

It was strange how opportunely this Durbar fell in regard to his maturing plans. It offered an occasion and set him a time in which to make provision, to determine a policy for the future, and lay down a safe course for his successors. Sita, under advice, should hold the reins of government during Jali's minority. At home there were many good men to help her, and at the Imperial Court there would be Gokal.

A glance at his water-clock now told him that in all probability Gokal had arrived and was waiting for him on the Great Terrace. This learned Brahmin was one of the few people with whom he could discuss the subjects that lay nearest to his heart. Gokal was modelled after an unusual pattern; although he had succeeded in capturing the consideration of the world, he was first and foremost a philosopher, a man whose

mind was set on eternal things. After dealing with men and affairs – and Gokal would soon post him up on the chief topics of the day – together they would glide off upon the tranquil waters of philosophy, and the night would pass and the stars grow dim while they drew in a refreshment sweeter than that of sleep.

He was on the point of leaving his room when a messenger presented him with a letter. The envelope, which he turned over and frowned at with great distaste – the envelope was formidably sealed and the handwriting, alas, was his sister's. It was a great temptation to leave the reading until later, for Ambissa's letters were always troublesome and this one was terribly bulky. Reluctantly he broke the seal and took a glance over the first page. Almost at once his brother-in-law's name caught his eye. 'As you know,' Ambissa wrote, 'we have not seen Hari here for over a year, and this prolonged absence of his produces a bad impression. Some months ago he annoyed the Emperor by a foolish attempt to excuse himself from the Durbar, and now some rumours have been started which cause me a great deal of worry. What can have been his reason for keeping company with Mahomet Ali at Kabul? I can't believe that he has begun to interest himself in politics, not even in revolutionary politics. And then where can he have been hiding during the last two months? I cannot help suspecting some new love affair, and if the injured husband is a man of any importance there will certainly be serious trouble; for the Emperor is becoming more strict in his ideas every day, and takes affairs of that kind into his own hands, although nobody likes it. There have been some terrible scandals here of late, and they have brought



him to the end of his patience. Very soon we shall have edicts against immorality as severe as those against meat-eating. After all, if a man can be put to death for killing a finch, he might well suffer as much for adultery. So Hari had better look out. Unfortunately, too, his sins will be visited on me. There are plenty of people here, you may be sure, who would like to hold me responsible for all his failings. A husband, they say, is what his wife makes him. A wife's place is at her husband's side, and so on. How happy these moralists would be to see me packed off into the wilds! And what a reward for all my past forbearance! Picture to yourself the kind of life I should lead in one of those half-ruined castles perched on a barren mountain! But it's not for myself so much that I am alarmed. Consider the boys! Their careers, which promise so well, would be nipped in the bud. Ali, you know, was sixteen last month; he is to be attached to Rukh Khan's household for the period of his visit here; and after the marriage of his daughter, Lalita, to Prince Daniyal, the Khan will be more influential than ever.'

At this point Amar groaned with impatience and looked to see how many more pages there were. Not many, and they could be skimmed, but his attention was held by the postscript.

'I have just this moment discovered that Hari's invitation to the palace at Agra has been cancelled. So now you see that I was not exaggerating! For pity's sake ask Gokal what he thinks. I simply cannot imagine what my position will be if Hari fails to appear at the Durbar. Please, Amar, come and see me to-morrow without fail, and make it as early as possible.'

The Rajah gave a little laugh of vexation. His own affairs were likely to give him trouble enough, and Ambissa was always immoderate in her demands. To begin with, she had made him late for Gokal.

HUGE, dim lanterns stood at the four corners of the terrace, spreading pools of light upon the marble flags beneath them; the rest of the great expanse lay cold and white under the stars. Amar's eyes wandered over the Emperor's guests, who were scattered in small groups here and there. It took him a few moments to distinguish Gokal. His friend's bulky form, draped in white Brahminical robes, would have caught his eye quickly enough had it not been partially hidden by the figure of the man in conversation with him. Who this was, the Rajah failed to make out until he had come quite near, and then, to his extreme surprise, he saw that it was actually his errant brother-in-law. Well! Ambissa, no doubt, would be vastly relieved, but this apparition was certainly no pleasure to him, not just now. It shattered his hopes for an evening of philosophy.

And, as if this were not enough, a drop of pure annoyance was added to his disappointment. His coming – he saw it quite distinctly – was of the nature of an interruption. Hari had been talking and Gokal listening, each with great absorption; and this was hurriedly dissimulated the moment their eyes fell upon him. It was an old puzzle what these two, in character, tastes, and habits, so unlike, found in one another. There the intimacy was, however; and he had just seen it illustrated in that eager confabulation. Not a question but that Hari had been letting Gokal into some exciting

secret. Well, Hari's secrets were of no interest whatsoever to *him*; only – and here he gave an inward sigh – he mustn't forget his duty to Ambissa.

Anxious not to give any clue even to the smallest of his feelings, he greeted Hari with more cordiality than was absolutely necessary, and a kindred instinct kept him from asking even the most natural questions. After all, it was for Hari to speak out of his own accord. Let him declare in so many words where he had been hiding during the last two months; whence he sprang; how (since he was not invited) he came to be in the palace at all; in short, let him account for himself. Why, even his dress called for explanation; that tunic of his was very old and scandalously dusty; his turban was torn and his riding boots had obviously not been polished for several days.

In spite of Amar's outward geniality the first greetings were hardly over before a silence threatened to descend. To prevent it the Rajah, eyeing Gokal affectionately, inquired with exaggerated solicitude after the state of his health. This big, sedentary pundit had a talent for humorously exploiting his own foibles, one of which was nervousness about the smallest bodily ailment. Quick to take his cue, Gokal replied with deep gravity that his appetite was not very good and that he feared the position of his present abode was not completely salubrious. He was occupying a little pavilion in the Royal Hunting Grounds, which had been put at his disposal by the Emperor. For this reason it was quite impossible for him to leave it, and thus, as Amar could see, he was placed in a very serious quandary.

While Gokal was talking Hari had looked distrait;

and now, turning to Amar with a certain abruptness: 'I hear,' said he, 'that you are going up to the Hills this year.'

Amar assented, and he was wondering from whom Hari could possibly have got the news, when the latter went on: 'Sita was telling me just now how much she is looking forward to the change. I fancy she sometimes misses her Caucasus.'

This time the Rajah was positively taken aback. 'Sita told you just now! What do you mean?'

Hari laughed carelessly. 'I have just been paying her a little visit.'

Surprise kept the Rajah silent.

'Was that too unconventional?' inquired Hari, raising his eyebrows.

The Rajah gave a short laugh. 'Of course not; although she must have been rather startled. For one thing, your clothes. . . . They made me suppose that you had only just got down from your horse.'

To this Hari said nothing, and in the pause that followed the Rajah did some rapid thinking. Hari, in his difficulties, must have conceived the notion of enlisting Sita's sympathies, and thought to steal a march by this strangely timed visit. 'But I won't have it!' he mentally exclaimed. 'I won't have him impose on her warm-heartedness.'

Annoyed, he turned away and let his glance wander about him. What a pity that trivial preoccupations were spoiling the serenity of this hour. The terrace, tinted gold by the lanterns, was itself like a great lantern suspended high in the deep blue air of the night. From gardens far below there rose a dampness scented with orange-blossom. Fireflies were darting their

greenish lights about the lower levels of the darkness, and overhead there was the sharp brilliance of the stars.

Amar had withdrawn so deeply into himself that at a touch upon his shoulder he started. It was Gokal; Gokal was pointing to a glow upon the western horizon, and in a low voice he said: 'Fatehpur-Sikri!'

The three men walked across to the balustrade, and as they did so a soft plume of light spread out in the distant dark. Others followed; arrows, fountains, and showers, of coloured light bejewelled that far-off patch of sky.

The memory of his first visit to the palace-city was revived in Amar's mind. That had been ten years ago, just after the completion of the principal buildings, and a few months before Akbar transferred himself there with his court. He remembered smiling as he stood surveying those walls of fresh-cut stone, uncertain whether he was contemptuous of Akbar or of himself – of Akbar for his confidence or of himself for his doubts. Did the Emperor never question whether the future would justify him? That splendid, unnecessary 'City of Victory' raised upon a waterless waste, did he never conceive of a later generation moralizing over its ruins? Well! Ten years had gone by since then, and that display on the horizon was Akbar's present answer.

In the meantime, Hari and Gokal had begun to talk about the coming Durbar. The topic was inevitable, although not altogether an agreeable one. There were few among the tributary princes who did not shrink from making a formal exhibition of their vassalage. If, in the ensuing conversation, the Rajah preserved an air of greater indifference than Hari, it was not because his feelings went less deep. The border chieftains were

accustomed to the arbitrament of arms; the conqueror in the field was your over-lord by the Will of God. But the Rajah's case was different; his father before him had decided not to throw away human lives in a hopeless struggle; his Principality had lost its independence, but retained an honourable place in the Empire, due to the esteem which the ruling house commanded. It was because he stood aloof from war that the Rajah was minded to regard Akbar as superciliously as the haughtiest of the militant Rajputs. His pride was rooted in ideas of racial, cultural, and intellectual superiority. Akbar might be a great conqueror, but what of that? He might trace his descent from both Tamerlane and Jenghiz Khan, but who were they? Barbarians without tradition, culture, or understanding.

In order to change the subject he at last turned to Gokal. 'I understand that the banquet to-night is in honour of the Ambassadors from the East. You, an oriental scholar, how comes it that you are not in attendance?'

'I begged to be excused on account of my health. His Majesty knows that after a State banquet I lie sleepless all night.' And Gokal sighed and smiled simultaneously.

'I have reason to believe,' said Hari with abruptness, 'that Akbar loves me no longer.' He threw a glance at his brother-in-law. 'I wonder if anyone can tell me the reason?'

'Not I,' returned Amar, laconically.

'Well, I expect it's all Ambissa's fault,' Hari grumbled this out with a kind of jocular bad taste. 'However, I shall certainly not stay in Agra for long unless I find

that I am properly appreciated. Now if you were in my place. . . .' He had been keeping an eye fixed upon one of the palace servants who was trimming the lantern in the corner; and, after breaking off, he suddenly called out to the man.

'I think,' he said slowly, 'I think you have been instructed to spy upon me.'

'No, indeed, my lord!' came the humble answer.

Hari compressed his lips. 'Present my compliments to the Palace Chamberlain and say I should be glad to have a word with him.'

As soon as the man had gone, the Rajah, who had been looking upon this scene with a puzzled frown, shrugged his shoulders and said: 'You lose no time in making yourself unpopular.'

Hari all at once seemed to recover his good-humour. 'Why should I be persecuted by eavesdroppers?' And his eyes twinkled.

'You are talking nonsense,' retorted the Rajah crossly. 'Even if that fellow was eavesdropping, what of it? You know as well as I do that spies are everywhere. It is part of the established order.'

'You may be accustomed to that sort of thing, but I am not,' replied Hari, still with a grin.

Amar sighed, leant back against the balustrade, and assumed an air of ironical detachment. 'By the way,' he brought out, 'you should have asked, not for the Palace Chamberlain, but for the Commandant.'

'Narsing is the man I want.'

'That is the Commandant. The Chamberlain - '

He had no time to say more, for a small, dapper figure was already to be seen advancing towards them. Mabun Das was one of those nobodies who attained to



positions of power in Akbar's Court. A hint of the subtleness and adroitness that had raised him from obscurity was given in the quick movements of his intelligent eyes and the flutter of his thin, nervous hands. With an elaborate gesture of salutation he stepped before Hari and let flow an elegant apology for failing to meet the distinguished guest at the Gate.

Hari's return of compliments was equally polite; and he added expressions of deep regret at his inability to accept the honour which His Imperial Majesty had done him in inviting him to lodge at the palace. To this the Chamberlain replied with chagrin, but not with much surprise. So far, so good, thought the Rajah; Hari seemed to be mixing a kind of tact with his tomfoolery. Very prudent was his extreme politeness towards this little, dark-skinned southerner, who had the advantage of him, although very much his inferior in rank. Not a word was spoken on the subject of the supposed eavesdropper.

'Having presented my excuses to you,' Hari went on, 'I have but one other desire before taking my leave; I wish to pay my respects to His Majesty's Deputy himself.'

The Bengalee's bright eyes flickered for a moment, then - 'Of course!' he cried, with an air of happy alacrity, 'I will go and acquaint Narsing Khan of your arrival at once.'

As soon as his back was turned, Hari threw a speaking glance at his brother-in-law.

'You have not saved your dignity yet,' commented the Rajah. 'That little scribe will most likely send word that Narsing is asleep or engaged. Why on earth you came here at all I cannot imagine.'

At this Hari's face darkened, but the cloud passed quickly. Hardly had the Rajah finished speaking before the silence of the now empty terrace was broken by the stir of an approaching company. Half a dozen link-boys came forward with lights, and behind them advanced someone whose importance was thus properly illuminated. Here, by a stroke of luck, was Narsing in all his glory. Nor was the big, burly Turcoman difficult to recognize, in spite of his having shaved off his beard and taken on, in place of his usual shabby hunting-suit, a glittering costume to match his recent appointment. It was before this impressive figure that Hari now planted himself, legs apart and head thrown back, with an air that was almost truculent.

'By Allah, the All-powerful!' the great man cried out, 'how do *you* come to be here?'

Hari grinned. 'And you, old elephant, why were you not at the Great Gate to receive me?'

For a moment Narsing looked as if he might take this amiss, but his good-humour prevailed. Pushing his jewelled turban aside, he scratched his head in perplexity. 'I told Mabun Das that, if you came, you were to be brought straight to my private room. The truth is - I have a matter of some delicacy to explain.'

Hari continued to look up into Narsing's large red face with amusement, and Narsing stopped scratching his head to pull at a recently vanished beard.

'Proceed without embarrassment,' said Hari; 'I swear by your beard that I am not a man to take offence.'

'Good, good!' returned Narsing, with a certain relief. 'Well, in a word, the trouble is this: His Imperial Majesty is seriously displeased with you.' The announce-

ment was accompanied by a look in which inquiry and commiseration were evenly balanced.

‘Then my invitation to this palace is cancelled?’

‘I am afraid it is.’

Hari smiled. ‘I thought as much. But what is the reason?’

‘There is no reason given.’

‘But a reason must exist.’

‘Well, my dear fellow,’ and Narsing gave a good-natured guffaw, ‘the reason – whatever it may be – is probably better known to you than to anyone else.’

With the air of having said something rather smart, he turned to Amar. ‘Eh, what do you say, Rajah?’

Hari put on an expression of patient resignation. ‘Some story of a woman, I suppose. Really, poor old Akbar has women on the brain. And no wonder,’ he added, ‘considering that the Royal Palace contains some five thousand of them.’

‘Hush!’ cried Narsing, genuinely shocked by this freedom of speech; and the Rajah, tapping Hari on the shoulder, drew his attention to the approach of Mabun.

Narsing assumed a haughty expression, which did not sit easily upon his genial features. ‘Mabun Das,’ said he, ‘why did you not inform me of Hari Khan’s arrival?’

The Chamberlain threw out his hands in a gesture of helpless protestation. Narsing, he explained, had set himself an impossible task in attempting to welcome each guest individually and conduct him to his apartments. Many had arrived at the same moment, and, as chance would have it, Hari Khan had passed through unwelcomed by anyone – not even by his humble self. ‘For this unintentional rudeness I have

already offered Hari Khan my whole-hearted apologies,' he added, turning to Hari with a charming smile.

A look of gloomy perplexity appeared upon Narsing's honest face. His responsibilities weighed heavily upon him. He knew that he was but a child compared to Mabun, whose mastery of the intricacies of etiquette was only equalled by his grasp of court intrigues. He was well enough acquainted with Mabun's ways to guess that his Chamberlain wished him to hold his tongue. When they were next alone together some obscure factor in the situation would be tactfully revealed to him. But class loyalty, as well as an old-established liking for Hari, caused him to turn to the latter with a questioning air. His eyes said: 'I would infinitely prefer to discuss your affairs with you rather than with him.'

There was a slight pause, and then: 'The apologies have come from the wrong side,' said Hari with deliberation. 'My entry into the palace, my dear Narsing, was, I am afraid, very unconventional. I got in -' and he gave a shrug and a laugh, 'I got in by a certain secret way.'

'By all the devils of Eblis!' exclaimed Narsing, prodigiously taken aback. He stared, then turned in partial illumination to his Chamberlain. 'And you had guessed this, I suppose?'

Mabun threw up his hands as one who is casting discretion to the winds. 'What shall I say?' he laughed. 'Perhaps I had my suspicions! But Hari Khan is Hari Khan. And after all. . . .'

Hari continued to address himself to Narsing. 'There is a secret way. . . . And, although it takes one through the women's quarters, I was indiscreet enough to try it.'

'Oh, Hari Khan!' Mabun Das cried out with archness, 'in the old days what a scandal such a confession would have made!'

Narsing, who was still staring, pulled at his absent beard.

'I don't like it,' he muttered. 'I don't like it.'

'I saw no harm,' replied Hari carelessly. 'I was curious to see whether that passage was open, whether an entry was possible for an uninvited guest.'

'Humph!' grunted Narsing.

For a few moments no one spoke; Narsing's glance swept round the empty spaces of the terrace and his face was heavy with deliberation. At last he clapped his hands and shouted for cushions. He found it difficult to think clearly while his feet were supporting a weight of sixteen stone.

'Look here, my friend,' he said at last. 'This is only a trifle, but we must get it cleared up at once. You are not in a position to play pranks of any kind. His Majesty, you know. . . . Besides, some of our guests here might well be scandalized. . . . In short, may Satan take you! I must get to the bottom of this affair.'

Thus speaking, he moved to a corner of the terrace where carpets and cushions had been spread upon the flags.

'Bring wine!' he called out to an attendant; 'and let it be well packed in snow. My official duties are over for to-night. I shall now hold an unofficial court of inquiry.'

Inviting Gokal to be seated on his right and Amar on his left, he sank down upon the softest of the cushions. His return to serenity was being greatly assisted by the

thought that the impeccable Mabun had been caught napping at last.

'Now, Hari Khan,' he began, after the wine jug had gone round, 'I must ask you to make a full confession. In the first place, where is this secret way?'

'You enter it from the old, disused elephant stables.'

Mabun nodded. 'I know. But I had ordered that a guard should be placed there. It is extraordinary!'

Narsing gave him an impressive glare, and then turned again to Hari.

'How long is it since you broke into the palace?'

'Oh, about a couple of hours, I suppose.'

Narsing held up a fat finger. 'Not more?'

'Well, make it a little more. But for the last hour at least I have been talking to Gokal on this terrace.'

Narsing became still more magisterial. 'And before that?'

'I paid a visit to my sister-in-law, Sita Ranee.'

Narsing glanced to his left, but Amar's face showed nothing.

'But – but it was an odd time for a visit. When did you arrive in Agra?'

'This evening. At sundown.'

'At sundown! And I see the dust of your journey still on you. Am I not right in supposing that you made your way straight into the palace?'

Hari was silent.

'Well, now!' continued Narsing, delighting in his own perspicacity. 'It remains for us to find out just why you were in such a hurry to get in.'

From this moment, warming to his task, he bombarded the culprit with questions. In a few minutes he elicited the statement that Hari had caught sight of

little Jali from the road below. And then came his masterstroke, the illumination towards which he had been struggling; he extorted from the reluctant Hari the admission that Jali had not been alone, that with him had been a maid – a young and pretty serving-maid – whom Hari had perhaps seen once or twice before. When this came out he made a noticeable pause, swept a glance round the assembly, and gave a wink so large and inclusive that everyone present had a share in it. Hari's impulse to enter the palace, his visit to Sita Ranee, the hour or so that could not be accounted for – all was explained. It was a triumph for the cross-examiner, and after Hari had sworn upon his honour that his sister-in-law's apartments were the only ones that he had visited, the good man declared himself satisfied, and the inquiry closed.

This, however, did not mean that he had finished talking. Hari had to receive a reprimand; the Rajah was told that he should advise his wife to be more watchful of the chickens in her charge; and as for Mabun Das – here his tone grew more magisterial – well! he hoped that Mabun Das was as much dismayed as he was to discover that the palace was insecure. Yes, insecure! An opening for scandal and even for crime had been revealed. Was not he, Narsing, answerable for the safety and honour of the highest-born and prettiest women in the Empire to the number of about four score? And what about their jewels? And what about the Emperor's treasure, well known to be lying in the palace vaults?

Colour had risen to his cheeks from the heat of his own eloquence; but the snow-cooled wine and the freshness of the midnight hour spread a peace to which

he had to yield. Allah, what a night it was! And how good it was, too, to take one's leisure after a toilsome day! Spreading himself out like a fowl of brilliant plumage, he cast his heavy turban aside and gazed up into the sky. These blessed hours of cool and quiet – he was addressing himself to Gokal – were they not intended by the Deity for love, for wine, for conversation with congenial friends and, of course, for religious meditation? To this Gokal gave murmurs of discreet assent. And then Narsing sighed. His kind heart was afflicted by the recollection that the Brahmin could not take wine. That wine was also forbidden to the Faithful was a thought that did not enter his head.



WHILE these matters were going forward Amar had preserved a detached and faintly ironic air. Nor was this indifference altogether feigned; it was certainly not in order to investigate his brother-in-law's intrigues that he had made the journey to Agra. And yet there was something in this affair that did tease his curiosity. Although he felt almost sure that Narsing was in some way being fooled, he could not believe that any of Hari's downright assertions were false. The puzzle, then, was to conceive what motive he could actually have had for this slinking entry into the palace, and what he could have been doing all the time besides paying that unaccountable visit to Sita. The story of an amour with a serving-maid did not provide a very convincing explanation. There might be something in it, but it seemed too trivial to account for the various peculiar features of Hari's behaviour. But never mind; enough, and more than enough! The wretched business had already received far more attention than it deserved.

Time for the Rajah passed rapidly in solitude, but slowly in the company of such men as Narsing. Narsing, although beaming with animal vitality, affected him as spiritually non-existent. Nevertheless, as he now told himself, these solid, bustling bodies had their place in the world, nor must he forget that it was his business whilst at Agra to be attentive to the thoughts of others rather than his own.

Narsing's discourse had now turned upon the Emperor, a subject upon which he was well qualified to speak. Springing like Akbar from Central Asian stock, bred in the same customs and traditions, a faithful follower for thirty years in the field as well as at Court, he had known the man in every phase of his career. His eyes had witnessed the building up of the Empire that now stretched over the whole of Northern India, from the frontiers of Persia to the Burmese jungle. The soldier, the administrator, the statesman, the despot, he knew them all. Nor had ample opportunity been wanting, in this stretch of years, to study Akbar's inner life. Only here Narsing had been frustrated by his own temperament. The deep racial and religious drives that carried Akbar along, now hurling him into blunder, now sweeping him on an even wave to success, these forces Narsing was not content simply to find incomprehensible; he had to puzzle and fret over them. More especially he was baffled by the Emperor's attitude towards his sons, and by his unending pre-occupation with religion. This last was surely a very dangerous tendency. Yes, obviously in these two provinces of human life Akbar was a bungler; he had never learnt how to deal with his children or with God. To take his sons first: the eldest, Prince Salim, was now openly preparing to usurp the throne; Prince Murad had just died of drink; and as for the youngest, Daniyal – well, what his father thought of him no one could tell, but he, Narsing, preferred even that rascal, Salim. Then turn to religion; Akbar had been born a good Moslem, but his friends had seen him first questioning, then rejecting, and finally oppressing the Faith. Not for one single day of his life had he known spiritual

tranquillity. At Fatehpur-Sikri a special hall had been build for religious debate, and here he would collect Sufis, Sunnis, Shias, Brahmins, Jains, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and crack-brained exponents of every variety of fantastic belief. And then he would make them talk. By Allah! how they talked! And what had come of it all? Nothing! Nothing, unless one was to refer to those clamorous and yet dreary sittings the puny thing that Akbar had recently thrust forth upon the world – a new religion, forsooth – the Din Ilahi, a miscreation that would be negligible were it not so powerfully fathered. The Din Ilahi was by way of containing the valuable constituents of all pre-existing faiths, and its practical purpose was nothing less than to unify the Empire and purify it. What could one say?

Such was the situation over which Narsing was now expending himself in voluble lamentation. He did not need to tell his hearers that the horizon was clouded, but he doubted whether, in the midst of so much splendour and apparent prosperity, they would realize just how threatening the outlook was. Had they heard that the Emperor was on the point of giving his new religion a formal promulgation? Did they realize the extent to which this absurd act would invigorate all the disruptive elements in the Empire? In every province, he told them, the more fanatical of the Moslems were already secretly promising Prince Salim their support, and the rest of the population was preparing to rally under Prince Daniyal. 'As for accepting the Din Ilahi,' and he flung out a hand at Gokal, 'is there, I ask you, a single man of self-respect who will condescend to it?'

Dejectedly the Brahmin shook his head.

'Ah, my dear friend!' sighed Narsing, 'you, who have the ear of the Emperor, why cannot you restrain him, dissuade him?'

Gokal said nothing, and his silence convicted Narsing of a want of tact. As a universally respected leader of religious thought, Gokal had grave responsibilities; and these, as anyone might see, threatened to clash with his private interests. For years he had been a special protégé of Akbar's; appointed Court Librarian, he enjoyed a privileged position by the Imperial throne.

Making haste to change his tone and topic, Narsing launched forth into a tirade against Salim. 'By Allah!' he cried, 'when I think of that man's insolences my blood boils. Can you conceive it, he has actually set up a mint at Allahabad and strikes coins in his own image! Yes, and the other day, if you please, he sent a complete set of his coins to his royal father "to add to his numismatic collection."' On the subject of the prince it was not difficult to be entertaining. Salim's character was so freakishly compounded that everything he said or did had its ridiculous side. Sensual, unprincipled and ill-educated, he, none the less, was a man of aspiration. For love he entertained a respect which made him sentimental, for religion a regard which threw him into the grossest superstitions, and for learning a craving that immersed him in alchemy and pseudo-scientific research. Narsing described how he had come upon him one day engrossed in an experiment to extract a special kind of copper from peacocks' feathers. And then, to be sure, there were his literary pretensions! His memoirs! From those stray leaves, carelessly left behind on his removal to Allahabad,

court gossips had derived much amusement. For instance, there was the famous description of Akbar: 'In his august personal appearance my father is of middle height, but inclining to be tall; he is of the hue of wheat; his eyes and eyebrows are black, and his complexion rather dark than fair; he is lion-bodied, with a broad chest, and his hands and arms long. On the left side of his nose he has a fleshy mole, very agreeable in appearance, of the size of half a pea. Those skilled in the science of physiognomy consider this mole a sign of great prosperity and exceeding good fortune. His august voice is very loud, and in speaking and explaining has a peculiar richness. In his actions and movements he is not like the people of the world, and the Glory of God manifests itself in him.'

'As I hope for Paradise!' exclaimed Narsing at the end of his quotation, 'what that rogue says there is true! Akbar is more than human!'

His glowing face and glistening eyes were an invitation to his audience to indulge a like enthusiasm, but none of the others had drunk so much wine and none, certainly, gave the Emperor so unstinting a devotion. Undeterred by their silence Narsing pursued his theme.

'Gentlemen! had you seen what I have so often seen, the tears would be no further from your eyes than they are from mine now. There, upon his seat on the terrace at Fatehpur-Sikri, night after night, alone, the Emperor sits. Like an image in stone he looks out into the darkness covering this great Empire – the Empire which the strength of his arm and the toil of his brain have built up. And mine, gentlemen, mine has not seldom been the honour of waiting upon him there. I

advance across the terrace bearing his jug of wine – the opium wine with which he strives to drown his sorrow. Sometimes the night is dark and I can see no more than his outline. But sometimes the moon is high and clear, and then what do I see? A face of grief! A face of bitter grief!

Without a doubt the good man was speaking from a heart which, if sentimental, was sincere; none the less this ebullition was felt by all to be rather embarrassing; his audience were not sorry when they caught sight of Mabun drawing near.

‘Well!’ demanded Narsing, his forehead wrinkling with vexation. ‘What now?’

Mabun sighed sympathetically. ‘Prince Daniyal! He asks to see you. He is waiting below.’

Narsing stared, then emitted a weary groan. ‘At this hour! Merciful Allah! What does His Highness want?’

‘I am not sure,’ answered Mabun with caution. ‘But he said something about the hairless cat that you promised to procure for him.’

‘The hairless cat! You hear that?’ He glared round at his circle. ‘The hairless cat! May he and his menagerie of disgusting pets – But enough! Where is my turban?’

Scrambling to his feet, he began to hunt, with many curses, among the cushions. While he was kicking about, Gokal found it for him.

‘I thank you, my honoured friend. You see what my life has become. No peace at any hour! Well, my friends, well . . . I wish you all good night. Rajah, do me the favour of seeing Hari Khan off the premises before you go to bed. Go in peace, Hari Khan; may

you enjoy tranquil slumbers elsewhere!’ With these words he strode off accompanied by Mabun, leaving his guests to smile after his retreating figure.

When talk was resumed it fell again upon the subject of Akbar, but now, left to themselves, the three friends felt at liberty to treat the Emperor rather differently.

‘I believe,’ said Gokal, when pressed to speak, ‘I believe that the Emperor’s inner life will always remain a mystery. His youth, as we all know, was wild and reckless; he drank to excess and wantonly played with death. We know, too, that he was subject to fits of brooding melancholy, and then – let me remind you of this – in his thirty-sixth year he had what some say was an epileptic seizure, an experience which he, however, regarded as a divine revelation. For a short time he renounced the world; his abdication was even thought possible. In Abu-l-Fazl’s words: “He was nearly abandoning this state of struggle, and entirely gathering up the skirt of his genius from earthly pomp. The primacy of the spiritual world took possession of his holy form. The attraction of cognition of God cast its ray.”’

‘For my part,’ threw in Hari, ‘I cannot believe that he is an epileptic. I suppose the peculiar strain of mysticism running through his character is somewhat suggestive of epilepsy, but, were he a true epileptic, he could not drink as he does without killing himself.’

‘I agree,’ said the Rajah, ‘and I should even hesitate to call him abnormal. He strikes me as being the average man, but raised to a higher power of manhood. One cannot point to any faults or virtues in the average man which he does not possess. He is sensual, a lover

of wine and women; boastful, often cruel, avaricious, cunning, hypocritical, and a colossal egoist. He is also an impassioned advocate of abstinence and self-control, humble before God, occasionally generous, simple in his affections, shrewd and credulous in equal degree, and unsparing of toil in the interests of his Throne and Empire. His Majesty is the plain man, I say, raised to a higher power. This constitutes him a natural autocrat. He aspires to make his people great and good as greatness and goodness are understood by him. If his ideas on the subject are a little elementary, that cannot be helped. I am not one of those who make it a grievance that he is great in his own fashion instead of in theirs; although, of course, it is hard for some amongst us, who are men of ancient tradition and culture, to accommodate ourselves to a civilization which is of a cruder type than our own, and imposed upon us from without – a civilization essentially materialistic. It is true that the Emperor himself has idealism; and his idealism takes, I admit, a certain grandiosity from the power that is within him; but all the same. . . .’ And Amar shrugged and shook his head.

‘The Emperor is not a happy man,’ said Gokal meditatively. ‘This age is his; he has made it. But he is beginning to realise that he has let loose influences that he cannot stem. When he built up an Empire he did not foresee that its culture would be tainted with a newly-born irreligion and vulgarity. When he studied the faith of his fathers he did not foresee that he would lose his belief in it. And when he undertook to supply a unifying creed. . . .’

The Rajah nodded. ‘After all, he is more than half a Mongol, and the Mongols are a people of prodigious



vitality, but they remain, broadly speaking, barbarians. Are you aware that amongst the rank and file the washing of clothes and of cooking-vessels is still held to be a sin? They will also tell you with pride that Tamerlane was born holding in his hand a piece of clotted blood. They still love dirt, honour violence, and believe in devils.'

'Whereas we, the civilized, worship cleanliness, honour sophistication, and believe in nothing,' put in Hari with a smile.

To this no one made any answer, for, at the end of the terrace, a slender white figure had appeared. 'Is that my friend, Mabun Das, again?' said Hari in a low voice.

After a moment the figure came forward, and Mabun Das it was, but the little man seemed somehow a shade different. Was it the absence of his superior that helped him to impart a greater confidence to his bearing? Or was he temporarily lowering the mask with which he concealed a self-confidence that was always there? Be this as it might, he moved very deliberately towards the three who sat watching him, and stood looking down at them with a smile.

'Well, Mabun Das,' said Hari genially, 'will you join us in a last cup of wine?'

Mabun declined with a bow.

'What is Prince Daniyal doing here at this time of night?' Hari went on.

The smile on Mabun's face did not leave it, but it seemed to sink inwards and to take on a meaning that was for himself alone.

'The hairless cat . . .' he murmured.

'And nothing more?'

Mabun shrugged. 'The Prince always keeps late hours.'

'No doubt, no doubt!' And Hari looked up at the stars.

'He also rises late.'

'I suppose so.' Hari's regard came down again. Every one's eyes were now bent upon Mabun interrogatively, for his gentle voice had a strangely mocking note.

'To-morrow, however, the Prince will rise early,' said Mabun. 'He will rise to witness the execution of four hundred and nineteen men.'

For a few moments no one stirred. Mabun continued to smile, and then suddenly sighed and looked grave. Strangely enough, however, this altered expression seemed just as factitious as the first.

'Yes, gentlemen,' continued Mabun softly, 'it is so! The Emperor signed their death-warrant a few hours ago. These men and women all belong to one or another of the seventy-two secret sects.'

The silence continued. Akbar's recent edicts were well known to all present. They embodied his repeated threats to sweep clean the limbo where religion and lust and every elemental instinct met – met in an obscurity that made their faces all baleful and all alike. A moral and spiritual corruption had set in with the mingling of so many races and creeds. Races copied only each other's vices. Creeds, forced to tolerate one another, learned to tolerate their own decadence. So the Emperor had ordered an inquiry and tabulated the results, he had issued edicts and fixed penalties. But the people had only smiled. The heavens might thunder, but where was the lightning to strike? This

sudden bolt, then, might well create dismay. Was it a sign that Akbar had lost his mental balance? Had he not known for years that a subterranean stream of bane was flowing beneath the visible structure of his State? Of course. For years he had known that thousands of his subjects were mysteriously disappearing from the earth. For years he had known that in hundreds of temples and secret meeting-places religious orgies were being held with a frequent accompaniment of human sacrifice. Perhaps it maddened him to be the Emperor of a people whose lives belonged, not to him, but to the Goddess whom he abhorred. In every village, in every city, in the palace itself, he could sniff the sickly taint. Saktism! Thuggee! The worship of the Female Principle! Kali, the Goddess of Birth and Death! Her power, against which Akbar warred, was subtle and diffuse as a pestilence. It had its tides, which were governed by the moon or fate. If the number, four hundred and nineteen, was savagely large, it was also comically small; you could multiply it over and over again with no result except that the people would murmur that their Emperor had gone mad.

With these unspoken thoughts in their minds, Mabun's hearers looked at him and wondered. Seeing that he was known to occupy an important position in Akbar's unofficial intelligence service, there was something a little sinister in his present air of detachment. Yet that detachment did not, perhaps, preclude a judgment; that calm was, perhaps, not cynical.

'So they will die in the morning,' said Hari, once more looking up into the night sky.

‘Yes. In five or six hours.’

‘And how?’

‘They will be trampled to death by elephants.’

‘And Akbar will look on?’

‘No. Only Prince Daniyal.’

Upon this there was another pause. Then Mabun suddenly began to smile his brilliant smile. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said in lighter tones, ‘I am afraid I have turned your thoughts into a rather dismal channel. I offer you my apologies. Before your evening closes, you will revert, I hope, to happier topics.’ With that he bade them good night, and for a while after he had gone the others sat there, pensive. The great lantern behind Gokal shone down softly upon the dome of his shaven head. Cross-legged and erect like a Buddha, he looked the very image of meditation. Hari, reclining upon one elbow, still kept his eyes fixed upon the shining constellations. Amar, whose gaze had followed Mabun frowningly until he disappeared through the arch, now reached out and for the first time that evening helped himself to wine. When he had drunk a little he looked deep into the bowl and murmured: ‘Gautama has said that as long as men remain bound in ignorance, so long will there be suffering.’

‘And evil?’ questioned Hari. ‘What of that?’

‘Evil springs from ignorance and delusion. The fires of lust and anger find no fuel when the delusions attached to individuality have been destroyed.’

Hari gave a brief laugh and turned to Gokal. ‘Is it not true that the only religion that was unrepresented at Akbar’s debates was Buddhism?’

Gokal made no reply, but Amar answered for him: ‘Yes. And that is significant.’

‘Of what?’

Amar’s expression was scornful. ‘In his Din Ilahi Akbar proclaims himself vice-regent of God upon earth. What should he have to do with a doctrine which teaches that there is no God?’

Hari considered for a minute. ‘Amar,’ he said at last, ‘when it comes to choosing between Salim and Daniyal, on which side will you lean?’

For a space Amar remained silent. ‘That,’ he said, and his tone was dry, ‘that I take to be a question of political expediency.’

Hari laughed. ‘Personalities, then, do not count?’

‘I know neither Salim nor Daniyal personally.’

‘But what have you heard?’

‘I gather from what I have heard that they are both, in their different ways, ignorant and foolish men.’

Hari laughed again. ‘Is Akbar foolish and ignorant?’

Amar was silent.

‘Remember!’ said Hari, ‘they both have the blood of Akbar running in their veins.’

Still Amar made no answer.

‘And Akbar himself,’ said Hari, ‘can neither read nor write.’

After this there came a long pause, and then Amar slowly rose to his feet. Hari followed his example, but Gokal still remained motionless with bowed head. Going up to him, Hari grasped him with affectionate roughness by the shoulder. ‘What is the matter with you, my friend?’ he cried. ‘The whole evening you have been dumb.’

Gokal looked up for a few instants, then let his head

sink down again; and thus he sat, a monumental figure of dejection.

Hari left him and took a turn down the full length of the terrace. When he came back Gokal was standing by Amar's side.

'Amar,' said Hari suddenly, 'let me tell you this: Evil is something more than you think.'

Amar returned Hari's gaze blankly and said nothing; but, undeterred by this lack of response, Hari went on: 'And I will tell you where evil is to be found. In human nature . . . I mean, in the very stuff of life itself. I tell you the word "human" means, fundamentally, nothing beautiful, virtuous, or intelligent, but something merely - strong. Akbar is very human, very average, very strong. As for you, you want to select. But you weaken yourself thereby. Life! its power is what it is. And to deny it is no deliverance. All that is below - whether in Akbar's soul or in the dark spirit of the masses . . .'

He stopped. He looked from Amar to Gokal, then at Amar again.

'This is my conviction, Amar,' he said in a low voice. 'What good men resist is not a mere prompting to pleasure, but something that they fear. Am I not right, Gokal?'

The big Brahmin raised both his hands and pressed them wearily to his eyelids. 'I do not know. I do not know.'

With a frown of sudden anger Hari seized him again by the arm. 'You shall stay here until you have spoken.'

Gokal dropped his hands and sighed. 'What do you want me to say?'

‘What you think.’

Amar gave an exclamation of impatience. ‘Enough of this!’ he cried, and, making a gesture of invitation to Gokal, he moved towards the archway.

Gokal, however, drew himself up and stepped back from both the one and the other with a resentful movement for which neither was prepared.

‘You ask for my opinion? Very well. To me the existence of what we call evil – in its many kinds and degrees – suggests the creative activity of numerous agents which may themselves be our own creations. These agents seem to be striving to embody different kinds of values. In nature there are hostilities – battles with victory and defeat. There is what seems to us regress . . . there is perversion . . . there may be a development in evil as well as in goodness, a movement leading down to Satanic abysses of being.’

The Rajah was astonished. Was Gokal associating himself with the vulgar polytheism of the masses? Was he declaring in favour of a Zoroastrian or Manichæan duality? Well, no matter! The tone in which he had delivered himself was petulant. It was not necessary to take him seriously.

Crossing the terrace in silence the three men now passed through the arch and went down the great stairway into the court below. At the Gate they had to wait for a few minutes while Gokal’s carriage was coming round. Beneath them lay the silent city with the moon just rising over the roofs. The night was flooded with a soft, sad light, which seemed to Amar to be like a dawn in the underworld rousing pale ghosts to another spectral day. His heart was full of a vague unrest, and an unusual longing for companion-

ship came over him. Gokal and Hari were about to drive off together, for Gokal had invited Hari to stay with him at his pavilion. He felt sure that they would continue to sit together, exchanging their thoughts until the day broke, and this idea increased his feeling of loneliness. When Gokal invited him to accompany them he accepted.



THE swift little horses trotted noiselessly along the dusty road, the light carriage swayed from side to side, and each of the three friends followed his own silent thoughts. After passing along the empty streets they went through the city gates, and a little further on turned off upon a soft track that ran under the trees of the Royal Hunting Grounds. Dry leaves crackled beneath the wheels; moonlight alternated with shadow; white moths and fireflies danced together among the boughs.

In half an hour the carriage drew up in a lane between the blossoming fruit-trees of a small enclosure, and here Hari, who had been looking about him all the time as if to take his bearings, sniffed the air and said: 'I smell water. Are we near the lake?'

In silence Gokal led the way through a narrow gate and up a path that wandered through the trees. Presently a line of slender tamarisks came into view, and the pale surface of a lake glimmered through their feathery leafage. The path now skirted the lake, which was an oblong sheet of artificial water, upon the stone margin of which were seated innumerable frogs. At each step of Gokal's several frogs leapt up and threw themselves into the water with a splash. Hari laughed immoderately.

A few moments later there appeared a long, low building, somewhat Chinese in style. Behind it stretched

a row of dark cypresses, in front was a terrace with a flight of broad steps going down to the water. This was Gokal's pavilion. It was built of a hard wood that had weathered to the same silver-grey as the stone of the terrace. Everything was grey in the moonlight except the shining water and the blossom upon two flowering trees, one on each side of the house.

Gokal led the way up the steps on to the terrace and there halted in a kind of dreamy uncertainty. But an old manservant, who had been lying asleep by the door, unrolled himself from his sheet and salaamed. Gokal bade him bring some fruit and some sherbet.

Standing at the end of the terrace, the Rajah looked out over the water. The moon was now dimmed by thin veils of cloud; and her light, diffused over the whole sky, fell gently and evenly upon everything. Tall, slender trees grew all around the lake in which they stood reflected; but in the centre, beyond these shadowy reflections, the placid water made a mirror for the grey clouds drifting past.

The Rajah went down the steps and along the water's edge as far as the corner of the lake. There he stood pensive, wrapped in an unexpected peace. The place seemed to him to be hallowed; it seemed to be watching itself, communing with itself; it seemed to be happy in the contemplation of an unchanging tranquillity. This, thought the Rajah, is a picture of the condition towards which the spirit strives, and with this thought there came over him an intense love of the place. Yes, he loved it with intensity. Some day it would surely be granted him to identify himself with

this repose, and to exist, selfless, brooding upon the face of these serene waters.

As he stood there the gross fatalities of the earth, the complications of the world, the uneasiness of human relationships, no longer troubled him. He thought of other men only as kindred creatures seeking – even when they knew it not – the tranquillity that is at the end of all desire.

After a while his eyes turned again towards the pavilion, but Gokal and Hari were not visible from where he stood. Slowly he retraced his steps and, mounting the terrace, found them seated upon a mat of rushes, with a low Chinese table spread before them. It was to be supposed that they had been talking together before he came, but now they were sitting silent. Gokal's head was bowed, his face hidden.

'Well, Amar,' said Hari drily, and he gave a nod in Gokal's direction, 'perhaps you can find out what is the matter with our friend here.'

The Rajah stood over Gokal's massive form, which drooped and sagged as if melted by the fervour of an inward grief. Thoughtfully he considered him. He knew that Gokal was subject to fits of profound melancholy, but his despair concerning the destiny of mankind was not infrequently to be traced to some personal mischance. This was a weakness that the Rajah greatly deplored.

He was still considering what line to take when, in a muffled voice, Gokal pronounced the words: 'I am mourning for one who has died.'

The Rajah was completely taken aback. In silence he and Hari exchanged looks of astonishment.

‘A child she was,’ continued Gokal without lifting his head, ‘a girl of fourteen . . . the daughter of a gardener. . . . A snake bit her . . . her blood was poisoned and she died yesterday. A young girl, very lovely . . . and dead so young.’

This confession fell so strangely upon their ears that for a minute neither Hari nor the Rajah could find a word to say. At last Hari shrugged and Amar stammered out: ‘My dear friend, I had no idea that you had a private sorrow of this kind. I thought –’

‘Amar!’ said Gokal, interrupting, ‘the favour of the world is nothing to me any longer. The Din Ilahi will fail in the end because it is a folly, and if, in the meantime, it brings about my ruin, what do I really care! My life is a weariness, and I am no longer young. It is true that I have forfeited my caste, and that the Emperor’s protection alone stands between me and disgrace. But whether I live or die, here or in exile, it is all a matter of indifference to me.’

Hari and the Rajah looked at one another again. Gokal’s state of mind was worse than they had thought.

At the end of a painful silence Hari pursed his lips and said: ‘Obviously, my dear Gokal, you were in love with this girl.’

‘She was a child – only a child,’ returned Gokal brokenly. He had lifted his head at last, and the Rajah noticed the glistening track of a tear that had rolled down his left cheek. ‘Her father is an old man and his other children are unkind to him. His wife is dead. He had looked after Vasumati from her infancy. . . . And now he sits all day upon a stone with his head in his hands. Men laugh at him because it was only a girl; but he moans: “My little love! My little love!”’

It is a pitiful sight, Rajah, and I hope that he himself will soon die.'

A chill ran down the Rajah's spine. He thought of Jali, thankful that the boy was sleeping safely in his bed. But Jali, to be sure, was not very robust. . . . 'Alas!' he sighed inwardly; 'alas! for poor human fondnesses! Links in the chain! Fetters! Fetters!' Not more than a few minutes ago he had felt free, a spirit rejoicing in its emancipation. But now his heart was flooded with a tenderness for earthly and familiar things; they seemed to him to possess by virtue of their very lowliness a dignity equal to that of deliverance itself.

Having spoken, Gokal buried his face in his hands, now openly overcome by grief. The Rajah was dismayed and even slightly scandalized. But Hari, with a compassionate smile, patted the Brahmin comfortingly upon the shoulder. The silence dragged on until suddenly Hari seemed to weary of sympathizing; with a muttered exclamation he rose to his feet.

'By all the gods and demons!' he cried, 'how comes it that a man such as he can so lose courage? Why is Gokal subject to the common weaknesses of humanity? He has intelligence. He has knowledge. He has wisdom. He should be glorious, but' – and he pointed to Gokal's huddled form – 'look at him! He weeps like a woman.'

'My dear Hari,' sighed the Rajah, 'he – he cared for this child.'

Hari walked up and down, possessed by an unaccountable excitement.

'Does he not know as well as I that we are all like frogs, like insects – alive one moment and dead the

next! We must not mind. . . . Life is a disgrace to those who mind death.'

The Rajah's gaze went out over the lake. 'The human affections are the most tenacious of all the chains -'

'Love,' interrupted Hari, 'love makes a man contemptuous of death. That - just that - is what I mean. Does a woman fear her own death or even the death of her lover? No! She fears only the dying of his love.'

The Rajah smiled. 'You are coming down to another level of ideas,' he said rather drily. 'You can hardly recommend that the whole human race should live on the emotional plane of a woman in love.'

'I do recommend it!' retorted Hari with headlong impetuosity. 'At least I denounce as shameful the emotional plane upon which we nearly all live. We spend our lives fretting over trifles - and running away from death. We live not that we may live, but in order not to die.'

The Rajah shrugged. 'Anyhow, the remedy does not lie, as you seem to imagine, in taking emotional intoxicants.'

Upon this there was silence for a full minute, during which the Rajah and Hari continued to eye one another. Then, laying a hand upon the knee of the heavy bowed figure beside him, the Rajah, too, bowed his head and sat dumb.

With an oath Hari turned on his heel and walked away to the end of the terrace. There a light shelter had been raised against the night dew. In a loud voice he directed Gokal's servant to spread out his couch,

then he came back and said: 'Amar, your bleak religion appears to satisfy you. So much the better. To me it seems that you are too easily satisfied.'

The Rajah smiled as if he had it on his lips to make a crushing rejoinder, but after a glance at Gokal, he said simply: 'Let those who can find God take refuge in Him.'

Then Gokal stirred; they heard him sigh, and all at once, in a low voice, he quoted the words:

"Men flee to God for a refuge from a knowledge that doth not profit, from a prayer that is not heard, from a heart that is not humble and a body that is not satisfied."

Hari look troubled. 'Is that true?' he asked after a moment; 'that we flee to God for those reasons and those only?'

The question went unanswered; Gokal remained without movement and the Rajah only sighed. After looking from one to the other Hari gave a shrug and announced his intention of lying down for a few hours' sleep.

In silence the two others sat there. The moon, now high, seemed to be hanging stationary over the lake; light clouds drifting around her were reflected upon the still grey face of the water; the night seemed endless and changeless.

In his search for something deeply felt to say Amar was sadly perplexed. His sympathies were complicated by embarrassment and even a slight irritation. What concern had this big, grave man of nearly fifty, this philosopher who stood high in the world of learning as well as at Court – what concern had he with an unlettered girl of fourteen, the daughter of a gardener?

Gokal's uncontrolled grief was not only pitiful, but scandalous and rather absurd.

With every passing minute his perplexity deepened and, as it deepened, it generalized itself; he brought his own life under survey and then he thought of life as a whole. Were there no certainties anywhere? . . . The lake, lying pale and still before his eyes, breathed a tranquillity that was no longer peaceful, but deadening.

At last he forced himself into speech. 'Gokal,' he said, 'your present grief is no more than a shadow drifting over the surface of your spirit. Wait a little and it will pass.'

Gokal's face had a stony pallor in the moonlight; the hollows of his eyes were dark, but Amar felt a deep, empty gaze encountering his own.

'I am grieving for that girl – yes!' And Gokal paused. 'But I am also grieving for my lost youth. I am regretting all the illusions I have not pursued, all the follies that I have not committed. Yes; it is for these things that I now grieve.'

Amar's heart contracted. Never before had Gokal sounded this particular note, and the words just uttered seemed to rob him of even the strength to sympathize. A voice within him was asking: 'Does one, then, come to this?' Gokal was no longer a person, but the small, ancient voice of mankind questioning whether life has any meaning, whether effort is not always vain, whether belief is ever true.

It was time to make an end. There are occasions, the Rajah told himself, when one must simply break off and wait for a change of mood. In an altered tone he made up a few sentences of rather conventional encouragement and then rose to take his departure.



In his heart he felt miserable and not a little ashamed, but his chief longing was to get away, and he tried hard to persuade his host not to accompany him back to the carriage. Gokal, however, insisted; and, together, in complete silence, they retraced their steps along the margin of the lake and through the shadows of the little wood. The coachman and the groom were asleep by the roadside, even the horses seemed to have gone to sleep. Amar made his adieux with a dryness that he detested all the more in that Gokal's manner to him was perfect. It had the dignity of sorrow with self-effacement.

After he had driven away Gokal stood gazing down the empty lane. 'I have said too much,' he reflected, 'for why should one's friends be troubled? The things I want to say should be said to oneself alone. Let me talk to myself then in solitude – an old fool addressing an old fool. Gokal, you are reckoned a wise man and a learned, but all that you have learned is the simplest and most ancient lesson in the world: it is better to laugh and weep like a child than to follow the wisdom of the wisest. You have travelled down the river of time with a swiftness that you did not see, and the years have carried you unaware into the waste lands of regret. All your life your eyes have been fastened upon the invisible; never did you look up at the fruit trees in the spring, or at the young girls blossoming beside you the full year round. You have studied and pondered – to no profit, gaining nothing but the respect of the simple, who, in reality, are wiser than you. So here, in the end, stands Gokal, with a round back and a round belly and a crushing load of regret.'

Unconsciously he had started into movement and

was now shambling aimlessly down the road. He saw nothing, heard nothing, was aware of nothing but his grief. But as he shambled along the dawn broke, and when he looked up a ray of light struck upon his face. For a moment he stood still, dismayed, then turned and hurried back towards the house. But the cruel, exquisite dawn was quicker than he. A golden light slanted through the trees, the dew sparkled, the earth rejoiced. And Gokal bent his head and went fast. The beauty of nature in its mindlessness, the beauty of instinct in its thoughtlessness, the beauty of youth in its ignorance – here were the objects of his longing and despair – these were the things that sent him scurrying along to hide like a creature of the night. Stripped of the kindly dark, he glanced shrinkingly from side to side and encountered, all at once, the gaze of two large brown eyes that were staring at him in innocent amazement. It was a little, low-caste lad of ten, who was lost in wonder at the sight of a venerable Brahmin stumbling along with a face bathed in tears.

THE same dawn mingled with Hari's dreams and roused him to a sleepy joy. He stretched himself and shivered slightly. A cool air was ruffling the lake, breaking the reflection of the trees, and making the trees themselves rustle and tremble against the emptiness of the sky. The pale yellow light was like coolness made visible; and as it sank through his eyelids, dissipating the sultry dark, he remembered why it was that he felt so happy; he looked back into the past and saw happiness; he looked forward, and there he saw happiness too. In an hour's time he would be strolling along the woodland path to his tryst. The morning would still be in its first freshness, the dew still sparkling, the sky still cool; and in his imagination he could already see the glade where he and his Lalita would meet. He could see her coming; he would hear her telling him that she loved him; he knew the exact tone of her voice, a voice that matched her colour, for she was of the hue of gold – hair and skin blending in one glow that made her vivid and warm. This was the girl that loved him; her health and youth went out to meet his passion, and together they lived in a transfigured world.

It was in Kabul, a couple of months ago, that he had first met her. He had been invited to dine with her father, the Afghan chieftain, Makh Khan. A thunder-shower had come down just before he left his house; the air was washed clean; the walls, the paving-stones,

everything glistened. How well he could remember standing in the flush of the evening light outside the great nail-studded door of the Khan's palace.

In the hall a table had been spread for six. They were all men there; and the talk – oh, it had been the usual talk; nothing of interest. After the meal they had gone into the inner court, and there had sat beside the fountain, smoking and drinking and eating dried raisins. The trembling water of the fountain threw up flakes of moonlight; the berried branches of the pepper-tree made a pattern against the sky.

Then the doors at the end of the court were thrown open and the ladies of the house appeared. The Khan's wife, a big, stout woman, came down the steps with an air of authority. Her three daughters followed; and Hari's first impression of Lalita was that this pretty girl of eighteen must have been badly spoilt. She carried her long-limbed, broad-shouldered young body with a kind of petulant looseness and the tilt of her chin said the company were nothing to her. But that was only a mood; she soon changed; and when she gave her first laugh – ah! then he felt he knew her. For the rest of the evening he watched, he was acutely sensible of her presence, and although hardly a word passed, once at least their glances met.

Returning to his own house, he went straight up on to the roof, and there remained half the night sunk in a deep, sullen abstraction. His life was empty, his energies wasted; he longed to express himself in sudden deeds of violence. All the smouldering disappointments of his life burst into flame; he hated his wife for her conventional ambitions; he hated his sons, whom she had alienated; he hated Akbar, who robbed men of

their liberty; he hated Makh Khan and his arrogant wife; he hated everyone – except Lalita.

The girl's smile haunted him; it had the unexpected brilliance of mountain flowers shooting up in the spring out of the stony ground. It changed the current of his thoughts; it reminded him of this and that thing said; it made him remember . . . yes, it had been mentioned that she was in the habit of going for long rides in the morning accompanied only by her groom. With this in his mind he started pacing up and down, and gradually the black cloud of his ill-humour lifted.

Early next day he summoned from his household a man that he could trust, and after giving him instructions, rode out by himself. About two miles away there was a hill overlooking the level valley bed, and at the top of this hill he dismounted and sat down upon the highland turf. There was a thin wind from the snows blowing past him, and a warmth from the rising sun upon his back. Goat-bells tinkled upon the slopes; further down strings of camels moved with grotesque leisureliness along the straight, shadeless roads; human figures were busy about the city gates like bees before the entrance of a hive.

A smile came to his lips and he fell to singing to himself. Pale brown earth beneath, pale blue sky above, and a great silence over all. His song was vague and endless, his mind empty of all directed thought. He was waiting so patiently that his waiting hardly seemed conscious of itself. It was as if he drew upon the patience of the ages, with the sense that it had always been thus. There had always been watching and waiting, and always for the same things.

At last the moment came. From beneath the city

wall, and not far from the city gate, something flashed in the sun. His gaze narrowed and he sprang to his feet. In a minute there were some more flashes and then he knew what to do. His eyes gleamed as he mounted and put his horse down the slope.

Not many days later Makh Khan, accompanied by his family, started on a long, leisurely journey south to Agra. The Khan was obeying Akbar's summons with a better grace than most, for it was probable that the Durbar would close with the marriage of Lalita to Prince Daniyal. He travelled with a cumbersome retinue, made short stages and pitched elaborate camps. In some places where the hunting was good he halted for as much as a week.

This suited Hari perfectly. In the guise of a horse-dealer and accompanied by only one servant, he followed the Khan; his modest tent went up every night at the distance of a mile or two from the Khan's site, and stolen meetings with Lalita could be arranged at the close of nearly every day. During the next eight weeks his contentment was complete. He had found romance with a spice of adventure, movement with leisure, a life lived in the present, unburdened and yet rich. All day he would jog along, now chatting with his man, now lost in a happy dream, but always with the thought of his last half-hour with Lalita or of the next to come. Evening brought him the moments of his joy — as ecstatic, as fleeting as the flaming colours of the sky; then, afterwards, he would sit outside his tent in a trance, or perhaps walk along through the dusk to some bit of rising ground, and from there gaze at the lights of the Khan's great encampment twinkling upon the plain.

At night, when he woke to throw wood on his fire, the stillness was infused with another gentler bliss. He watched the flames leap up and shine upon the little pyramid of his tent, or on the trunks of trees and the underside of leaves, or on some jutting rock that cut against the field of stars. As a rule he was awake in time to see the dawn, and one dawn in particular constantly returned to his memory; the sky was of the purest, palest blue, with a few motionless little clouds poised high. It was so unearthly in its silence and purity that he would have been unsurprised if a bevy of angels had flown across it. The essence of serenity was there: a few stars still twinkling through the light-filled air and the grass grey with dew.

Ah! those had been enchanted days; and even now, in this present, with a meeting round the next bend of the path, he could not but cast his eyes backward and stifle a mounting sigh. The first period of the romance was over; the next extended into a most unpromising obscurity. However, to give fortune its due credit, the immediate future looked well enough; the Khan was taking up residence in a garden house of Prince Daniyal's, which was actually on the edge of the Royal Hunting Grounds. For the present, meetings with Lalita could be continued without difficulty.

To while the minutes away he pictured the moment of her coming. First he would hear the thudding of her horse's hoofs, then at the bend of the glade she would appear. Still at a little distance she would pull up, dismount, and throw the reins to her groom. Always she came to him on foot and alone. She would come slowly, looking straight before her and smiling with that deep, glowing smile. During those few

seconds the flame of his happiness would soar up to its full height. Anticipation and realization became one and filled him with a double life. Consciousness and self-consciousness, too, worked together, so that he could say of his happiness: 'I have captured it! Here it lies in my hand!'

Stretched out beneath a tree he closed his eyes and there followed an interval during which he was completely lost in his dreams. When he looked at the sun again it was to realize that Lalita was late, and with this came his first twinge of anxiety. From now onwards, he well knew, his disquiet would steadily increase. It would deepen and darken until it became a veritable torment. Was it not strange that only at times such as these did a clear vision of love's miseries come to him? And yet – it was past all question – his happiness during the last two months had been shot through with panics and despairs beyond count. Before him there now lay perhaps an hour of anguish – the time for disappointed hope to burn itself out – then wearily he would get up and go back – dull, spiritless, racked by fears.

To live in one's emotions meant this; it was slavery; he saw it well enough. But was it on that account ignominious? No, he said, no and no! Better this suffering than contentment in the humdrum. It was out of one's subjection to love that love's ecstasies were born. Remember, he said, the sense of lordship over life, the sustained exaltation of days and weeks when you became mindful of ordinary existence only to give it a smile. Think, think again how the world appears to a lover! all those little people down there, ridiculously intent upon the insignificant; look at



them, content to let life slip past them, as if there were no such thing as love, that present ecstasy; or death, that onward-rushing night! Yes, to the human spirit thus expanded the common scene appeared for all the world like a piece of make-believe. You couldn't conceive that people were not pretending, not playing parts. Good heavens, it was life itself that they ignored! Couldn't they see that love and death alone had any importance – and death only as being the end of love? Well, no matter! He had seen and been content. He had bidden the seas rise and overwhelm him. He had bidden the mountains fall and crush him. Overflowing with life he had been joyously ready for death.

For death? Yes, perhaps. But was one ever resigned to *this*? Sullenly he rose to his feet and with a sullen slowness followed his path back through the wood. Why had Lalita failed him? All the elements of hazard and danger in their intrigue took shape before his eyes. Risks that had added zest to his pleasure in the past now looked merely forbidding; after all, they were *her* risks, too. Her misdoing in the eyes of the world would appear far more outrageous than his. For a girl of her race and station it would have been bad enough in any circumstances, but after having been pledged to a Prince of the Royal House . . . An insult to the Throne! that was what people would say. The fact that she was not as yet actually his mistress made no particular difference; no one would believe it, for one thing; moreover, the exact degree of her culpability would be a trifle, if once a scandal arose compromising the honour of the Prince.

Hari's thoughts might have gone on in this fashion for hours had he not turned upon himself in a sudden

burst of rage. Fool! Was this the first time that Lalita had failed to keep an appointment? and the obstacles that had kept her back in the past, although insurmountable, had they not always been quite trivial in themselves? Sanelly considered, the present case offered no feature that a man had cause to worry about. And yet he *was* worrying; and just because worry *had* to find a point of focus, he had found one.

At their last meeting – which had taken place only the evening before – a slight misadventure had occurred. He had ridden into Agra a few hours after the Khan, and, as previously arranged, had met Lalita just before sundown at a chosen spot in the Royal Hunting Grounds. The meeting had been hurried, for the light was fading and Lalita was not supposed to stay out after dark. And then what had happened was this: he was taking her back to her groom when all at once her horse shied violently, swerving off the narrow forest track. She crashed through some low-growing shrubs, and at the same instant a cry rang out as if someone lying hidden by the wayside had been hurt. He, himself, who was following a few yards behind, quickly caught her up and was successful in seizing the rein of her mount. Upon this she jumped to the ground and was beginning to run back to see what had happened when he called out to her to stop. His tone must have been peremptory, for she obeyed at once. He found it difficult afterwards to remember just what had been in his mind at the time; but, although he had not actually seen anyone at all, he certainly had had an uneasy feeling that several people were lurking in the undergrowth near by. Rather unwillingly he left her to hold the horses and went back a few yards until

he caught sight of a crouching figure a little way off the path. It was a woman, and next he perceived that she was bending over a man who lay prone upon the ground. On his nearer approach the woman looked up, and with a quick gesture flung a veil over the man's face. At this he halted. In the dim light little more than the mere outlines of the two figures was visible; but he had already been given a sign that his presence was not wanted, and, for his part, he had no wish to stay. Quickly rejoining Lalita, he told her that there was nothing to be done, and insisted upon her riding off with him at once.

That was the whole episode; and why should his imagination now plague him with the idea that it might in some way be connected with Lalita's failure to appear? On the face of it, nothing could be less likely. The time and place of their rendezvous could not have been known by anybody beforehand; they had ridden away before anyone could have taken note of their appearance; and, lastly, they had not been followed – of that he was quite sure. No; the fancies he was lending himself to were ridiculous.

## VIII

It was just at the moment when his thoughts were reaching this turn that his ear caught the patter of bare feet running along behind him. He drew up sharply and waited. Round the bend came Lalita's groom, a man whom they could both trust. There was a letter in his hand, and when Hari had cast his eyes over it, his whole aspect became different. All was well; Lalita's absence was explained by her having received a message from Prince Daniyal to say that his visit, which should have been in the afternoon, was to be paid in the morning instead. She gave him a rendezvous for the next day.

When Hari went on again his spirits had swung back to an even greater height than before. He was one of those people who enjoy their foolish happinesses all the more for being aware of the folly in them; and in this case he yielded to his emotion with the abandonment of a drug-taker revelling in his drug. Once again he became negligent of everything outside the ecstasy of his love; he snapped his fingers at Prince Daniyal; he waved aside the problems of the future; he shrugged over the accident in the wood. In a happy dream he followed the path back to the pavilion; still in a dream he mounted the steps, and it was not until he found himself face to face with Sita that he came back from his visionary world.

She was sitting on the little terrace all alone. In her

smiling eyes, as she looked up at him, he thought he detected a glint of raillery. She had driven over, it appeared, to spend the day with Gokal, Amar having taken himself off to Fatehpur-Sikri on a variety of affairs, one of which – she threw this in rather pointedly – was to pay Ambissa a visit. At the mention of his wife's name Hari's face darkened and he actually gave a frown. 'Well, I see that you, too, are in no hurry to pay visits at Fatehpur-Sikri!' and his tone, unwarrantably enough, seemed to suggest that they were under equally strong obligations. The truth was that confusion was beginning to creep over him at the thought that there was much in his past conduct to account for. Amar could hardly have avoided saying something . . . and she would certainly consider that he had been guilty of bad taste – yes, very bad taste – to make the least of it.

As he seated himself beside her he racked his brains for something to say. Gokal had just sent out word that he was not to be expected for another half-hour; in the meantime here was Sita, looking so charming, and also – he was sure of it now – faintly disdainful.

Although they were old acquaintances, they were not by any means intimate. He could not do otherwise than suppose that she shared Amar's general disapproval of him; but then she was by no means fond of Ambissa; she viewed her sister-in-law's weaknesses far less tolerantly than Amar, he knew that; so it was reasonable to hope that her attitude towards him on the whole. . . . Whilst he was thus inwardly considering, the talk fell to her, and friendly as her tone was, it sounded just a shade too even, too balanced, in his ear. When she said something again about her

approaching sojourn in the hills, distraitly he answered that Gokal, too, had taken a house in the Khanjo valley, so it appeared that he would be a near neighbour of theirs.

‘Yes, and I am simply delighted to hear it!’

‘I expect you will see me there as well, Gokal has asked me to pay him a visit.’

He said this without thinking; as a matter of fact he had made no plans, his sole concern at the present time being to keep in touch with Lalita. But directly he had spoken he had cause to regret it, for although Sita again exclaimed, this time, he felt, there was little more than politeness behind her phrases.

In a moment his mind was made up. ‘Sita!’ he said suddenly, ‘I am sure that what you are thinking about me is not at all to my advantage. I want you to let me explain about last night. Yes, please!’ he went on, as she gave a little laugh of protest, ‘I insist upon your listening. Perhaps your opinion will not be very different when I have done, but I do want you to know the truth.’

She opened her eyes as if in wonder at his earnestness. ‘Of course, I will listen, if you like.’

‘First of all I have to apologize for my visit. It was not the right thing to do.’

For a moment she hesitated. ‘I think you were using me as a blind.’

He coloured. ‘Not in the way you think. It is not true that I have been making love to one of your maids. I made use of that suggestion when I saw the opportunity arise; but it is not the truth.’

‘Oh!’ She looked straight at him in surprise, ‘Then you were lying to Narsing when you said –’

'No. For I am not carrying on an intrigue with anyone at all in the palace. Really I can hardly explain even to myself the impulses that came to me that evening and made me act as I did. I can only tell you that I had an instinct to do something peculiar in order to throw people off the scent . . . in order to build up, if possible, some kind of alibi. The truth is, you see, that I had had an accident a little earlier – in the Royal Hunting Grounds – an accident in which I and another were involved. I think we escaped the risk of subsequent recognition, but as a precaution. . . .' And his looks asked her to make the best of what was, to be true, a rather obscure explanation.

'But – was that accident a very serious affair?'

He shrugged. 'I cannot tell. Probably not.'

'Well! Why, then, was it so important . . .?'

'Who can tell, in this world, what is important and what is not?'

'There must have been something in your mind,' murmured Sita, after a pause.

He threw himself back with a laugh. 'You are right. You are right. But' – and he laughed again – 'God knows what I had in my mind.'

She regarded him with a good deal of curiosity, but said nothing.

'As luck would have it,' he went on, 'my attempt at an alibi succeeded astonishingly well. Dear old Narsing demonstrated to his complete satisfaction that it was before sunset I entered the palace. I believe Mabun Das is convinced of it too. And Mabun being at the head of Akbar's private spy service, I could hardly have done better.' He chuckled. 'Whatever comes of that accident, no one is now likely to connect *me* with it.'

Sita reflected. 'It is quite clear that you are afraid something *will* come of it.'

Hari shook his head laughing. 'No. That is just a kind of superstitiousness. The small unexpected things in life so often turn out to be the most disastrous. Wherever I look I see chance ruling the world, and I resent it. And yet,' he went on, after a pause, 'why should I resent it? My purposes are usually ill-judged and chance really does me a kindness in defeating them. Yes, I am lucky; for, after defeating me, chance quite often throws an unimagined windfall at my feet.'

If this was an endeavour to engage Sita's interest, it appeared to fail in its object. While he looked into her face she looked steadily out over the sunlit lake, and he was unable to feel that he had done himself very much good. During the ensuing silence his thoughts always came helplessly back to this: 'If only I could tell her that I am in love – seriously in love!' But that could not be said.

All at once she smiled to herself, and this he interpreted hopefully.

'Don't judge me harshly!' he pleaded.

'Why do you set me up as a judge? What does my opinion matter? Anyhow, my dear Hari, I don't understand you at all.'

'Oh, yes!' he assured her.

'I don't,' she persisted, laughing. 'I mean I can't make out what you live *for*.'

'But do you know what other people live for?'

'Others do seem to have some sort of focus. They have religion, obligations, ambition – or something. But, of course,' she added hastily, 'I have no right to talk to you like this.'



A faint colour had appeared on her cheeks; and her eyes wandered; she was going to get up.

Hari leant forward. 'Have you considered what is left to a man like me – living in this age, under Akbar? Ambition has been crushed, obligations are out of fashion, and as for religion – well, there is really too wide a choice. I was brought up as a Moslem, but' – and he shrugged – 'Allah, alas! has not kept me orthodox. I have a wife and children, it is true, but – their ways, their tastes, are not mine. I once had political responsibilities, but the Emperor has been graciously pleased to remove them. Well, my dear Sita, what is left?'

There was enough truth in this to give her pause, and as for engaging in argument, that would have been to presuppose a foundation of intimacy that was not there. Although strong in her own faith she was not given to proselytizing; on the subject of Hari's delinquencies as a husband she could not have spoken with much warmth of feeling, for her sympathies did not fall naturally on Ambissa's side; and as for his public duties – well, here no doubt there was something to be said. She could remind him that there had been a time when he had enjoyed the Emperor's favour in a quite unusual degree. She could say that he ought not to find it difficult to win back Akbar's regard, and obtain some honourable post in the Imperial Service. But really she had no particular desire to advance anything; why should she? And while she was still hesitating Gokal made his appearance; on the whole, to her relief.

In the talk that followed Hari took a very small share. A veil of preoccupation descended over him,

and Sita, although slightly intrigued, made no attempt to penetrate it. At a little distance, under the trees by the lake, Jali was trying his luck with rod and line, and presently he let out a shout of mingled triumph and consternation, for he had caught a fish. They all had to hurry down to help him take it off the hook and throw it back into the water before it could come to any harm. Whilst this operation was in progress, Hari, who took no active part in it, stood behind looking out over the water, and for a few moments, rapt utterly away, he was with Lalita in another world. Moreover, it so happened that in one of these moments Sita raised her head. He was never to know it, but her glance rested upon him briefly; the next second she was bending down again, deeply busied with the deliverance of the little fish.

IN the afternoon, during the hour of siesta, Hari rose from his couch and quietly left the house. What took him out in the heat of the day was his anxiety to recover a riding-whip, which Lalita had dropped – at least so she said in her letter – close to the scene of the accident. There was just a chance that this whip, if picked up by someone else, might lead to her identification, for, set in its handle, was a sapphire of unusual beauty, a present from Prince Daniyal. He set out, accordingly, determined to make a thorough search. But, to begin with, it was not easy to find the place again, and when at last he found it, he hunted for the whip in vain. Vexed, he was on the point of going back when the idea came to him to explore that region of the wood on the chance of coming upon some clue to the character of the mysterious party and their business in the neighbourhood. Faint tracks seemed to indicate that they had taken a small, winding path that went off into the very thick of the undergrowth. He followed these traces for about a mile, and then came to a small clearing. In the middle stood a bungalow, not unlike Gokal's, but smaller, and in a condition of decay. He stood staring at it for some time before advancing across the open ground; for although the clearing was overgrown with weeds and the building itself bore every sign of desertion, he could not prevent himself from imagining that someone was peeping at him from

behind the closed shutters. At the door he paused again; from the roof there hung down wisps of dry, grey moss; ants had built a nest against the threshold and the droppings of wood-pigeons whitened the window-sills. Contrary to his expectations the latch came up when he tried it; the door opened and a curious smell spread upon the fresh air. Its chief ingredients, to be sure, were rotting wood, decayed matting and bats' dung; but, to his perplexity, there mingled with these odours the sweet scent of a certain flower. He recognized the scent quite well, but could not at the moment recall from what flower it came.

On either side of the entrance hall there was a door. He tried each in turn and found it locked. None of the other rooms, however, were locked and he found them dusty and bare. On his return to the entrance hall he noticed that it was from the room on the right that the smell of flowers came; it filtered through a lattice that ran high up along the wall. Drawing the hunting-knife from his girdle he attacked the lock and in a few seconds the door yielded. The interior of the room was dark, but from the threshold he could see some objects thrown down in a corner, and gradually his eyes distinguished two or three rolls of rugs, several large bundles wrapped up in white linen, and a great heap of dark flowers. As he stood there a moth fluttered out and blundered into his face; it was a big, white moth, exactly like those that had kept flying into Lalita's face the evening before. His eyes following it about in its blind, aimless flight, he fell into a profound muse.

What roused him at last – or so it seemed to him – was the very intensity of the surrounding silence. It

was a silence that magnified every little tick of sound that dared to impinge upon it. Outside the house there was, indeed, the vibration of insects' wings, but inside nothing, nothing.

At last he stirred from his place; he went into the dusky room and threw back one of the shutters. He unfolded the rugs and found them to be of the finest quality; the bundles contained food, wine, spirits, silver drinking-vessels and some sashes of scarlet silk. The flowers, which had looked black, turned out to be, likewise, scarlet. Having finished this examination, he stood up straight; with pursed lips he nodded slowly to himself; a light – a partial light – had dawned upon him.

Several minutes went by during which he stood there looking out through the unshuttered window and frowning intently; he stood there until some fancied sound behind him caused him to spin round with a start. After this he closed the shutter and left the room, draw-the door to behind him. Across the passage there stood the other door, closed, challenging; his eyes rested upon it in dubiety, and then he again drew his hunting-knife and set to work with a quiet but vigorous hand. A few strong thrusts sufficed; the door opened, revealing a room similar to the other and shuttered, but, facing west as it did, the fierce afternoon sun beat in through the broken slats. There was light enough to show him – in the corner opposite – a girl lying asleep, or rather only half asleep, for she had been disturbed by his forcing of the door. Still, as it seemed, in a dream she lay there, but her eyes were open and staring. His entry, to all appearances, moved her no more than this: that she lifted her lids to stare at him with wonder.

For his part, Hari stared, and there was no further movement on either side, until, leaning back against the door-post, he gave her a smile and good day.

That smile lingered on during a further interval of complete silence. She was so lovely, this girl, that while his eyes rested upon her he could not help smiling for pleasure. The freshness of childhood was still hers; what her last year had added was softness and bloom and a depth of luminous secrecy behind the eyes – those eyes that veiled – and in so doing betrayed – a consciousness of sex and beauty. As now she moved into a sitting posture, her light garment, falling away, revealed a perfect neck and shoulders. At this she looked down and away, but made no other movement, and still she said nothing.

When Hari addressed her again it was to ask what she was doing there, and who she was. But to these, the most obvious of questions, she seemed unready to make reply. With eyes that looked beyond him rather than at him she murmured that she had been asleep; and vaguely, but enchantingly, she smiled.

After her voice had died away a gradual change came over Hari's face. His gaze became shrewder; he could place her; she was one of millions. Millions were like her in all respects save one – they lacked her astonishing beauty. Carelessly did the potter scatter these common vessels over the earth, so carelessly that when one, such as this, chanced to come flawless from his wheel, no notice did he take, no provision did he make. This was a common flower that might blossom on any dunghill and fall to any fate. Moreover, unless beauty had its special rights, who could say that she deserved better?

Abruptly he fell to questioning her, and there was now a certain sharpness in his tone. But his gaze had already revealed admiration and it was from this that she took her cue.

Playing with the folds of her dress, fingering the braids of her hair, she gave answers that told him nothing. She was as baffling as a stubborn child.

It was not long before he adopted another line. 'Let me tell you something. I have been into the other room,' he said.

For the first time she showed a trace of disquiet; her gaze seemed to darken, although it remained steady.

'I know,' he went on, 'what you are here for.'

Did he? She tried to brazen it out with a laugh. Well; he knew more than she did! She had no idea – no! She supposed she must have been drugged. And her lids dropped again, her lips parted in a delicate suggestion of a yawn.

One might well have lost patience, and Hari was half ashamed of himself for not doing so. To be sure, she was deserving of pity, but pity could do nothing for her. Her obstinacy made a fool of him and the answer was to shrug and leave her. But he was not content to do this until he had found out one thing. After casting about for a moment he made a fresh start.

'How do you know that I am not one of you?' he asked softly.

She continued to fix him with her deep but guarded stare.

'In any case you had better be frank; if I choose, I can denounce you.'

'But I've not done anything! Tell me, what have I done?'

'You came here last night in a company of Vama-charis – Followers of the Left-hand Way.'

She was silent.

'Are you not aware that the Maharaj, the Shah-in-Shah, His Imperial Majesty Akbar, has ordered that the Vamacharis are to be trodden to death under elephants?'

Oh, it was a shame, a shame! And she shuddered. It was cruel to frighten a girl like that! What should she know of such things? Nothing! Nothing! And there was a sob in her voice.

Hari came up to her, grasped her beautiful arm and drew her to her feet. At the touch of his hand she at once became self-conscious, cast down her eyes and bent her head. He stood over her, very close.

'Lovely one, what is your name?' he murmured.

She put her beads up to her lips, and although her face remained hidden he could guess that she was regaining confidence. This was the kind of approach she knew best how to meet.

'Tell me, what is there to prevent me . . . in such a lonely place . . . from plucking this Flower of Delight?'

Her silence gave him his answer.

Compassion again stirred within him. To be so beautiful and to hold oneself so cheap!

'And if I promise not to betray you,' he said softly, 'will you then not cease to be afraid?'

Drawing her into his arms: 'How old are you?' he whispered.

She was fifteen.

Did she live in Agra?



No, her father had a vegetable plot outside the city gates.

How came it that she was not married?

They were poor.

Of her lovers was there not one she preferred?

Rippling with a soft amusement, she shook her head.

'Tell me,' he whispered persuasively. 'Have you acted as a Yogini before?'

She looked up with rounded eyes. 'A Yogini?'

'That's what they call those who represent the Goddess.'

'Oh, I thought you meant the other kind – a Dhuta. I thought: "O, my mother! does he take me for an evil spirit?"' And she laughed quite gaily.

'Tell me, O Lotus of the Dawn, tell me, why were the rites not celebrated last night?'

'Because there was an accident,' she replied, but not without slight hesitation.

A smile of intelligence – which she could not see – flickered over Hari's face.

'An accident!' he echoed in a tone of surprise. 'What was that?'

Very briefly she told him. 'One man was hurt – stunned. The horses knocked him down.'

'And those two riders, the man and the woman, did anyone recognize them? Would any one of you know them again?'

She shook her head. 'I don't think so. It was too dark.'

'Who was the injured man?'

'Oh,' she cried out, 'I don't know him.'

Hari paused. Was it his own arms that had stiffened

or her body within them? After a sigh, he said simply: 'I wonder!'

That was as far as he got; his further questions elicited nothing – nothing except that her party had brought her here, given her food and wine (the wine was infused with poppy; he could smell it in her breath) and bidden her wait until they came again.

Not long after this he bade her good-bye, and he could see that his going caused her not only relief but astonishment. Without doubt she had expected to pay a price for his promise of discretion. But she had already given him more than she knew. Just as he was leaving, however, he received a slight shock of discomfort. His eye caught the gleam of something bright that had slipped down between the wall and her mattress. Could it be the handle of Lalita's riding-whip? He had to refrain from questioning; it would have been quite impossible to claim the whip; and inquiries might have aroused suspicion. All that he could do was to stumble against the mattress in an endeavour to shift it and give himself a better view of the intriguing object. But the manoeuvre failed.

Time and again in the next few days Hari's thoughts went back to the girl, and from that starting-point they wandered off along shadowy avenues of speculation. Although he had already taken Gokal into his confidence as regards Lalita, he abstained, for some reason or other, from telling him anything about this encounter. Nor did he say anything to Lalita about it. She, since her arrival in Agra, was showing symptoms of a new nervousness, a new dread of being found out, and her anxieties at the present time attached themselves in particular to the loss of her riding-whip. About that

she was superstitiously apprehensive. Had he been able to provide her with complete reassurance he would, perhaps, have spoken out, but the story would be bound to disquiet her and to stimulate her curiosity rather than satisfy it. What could he find to explain to her about the Vamacharis, that sect, the very name of which was not pronounced in polite society? And then she would be sure to ask how seriously the man had been injured, and who he was. This last question was one that he was particularly anxious she should not fasten upon. In his own mind it was troublesome already. When his thoughts went back to the girl's: 'Oh, I don't know him!' he found imagination and memory inextricably confused. His efforts to recover her exact look and intonation only added to his uncertainties. Had the significance of that exclamation disclosed itself to him rightly at the time or had it not? He had received the impression that she wouldn't confess to knowing the man because it would be dangerous. Why dangerous? Because he was a personage. She wouldn't *dare* to know him or even to know who he was. No, no! She had more sense than that.

Such was the meaning that Hari gave to her cry, and the reason why it suggested itself so readily was that it went to confirm an earlier suspicion. The injured man, stretching his length upon the ground, had presented what seemed to him, even in that uncertain light, to be a figure of some consequence. He couldn't have said exactly why, for no detail of the lineaments or even of the dress had been discernible, but the impression had been definite. And now another idea shot into his mind – this time a very extravagant one. What, he questioned, had Daniyal been doing in

Agra at that hour of the night when he called upon Narsing with some ridiculous inquiry about a hairless cat? Might not the Prince have put in his appearance in obedience to an impulse somewhat similar to his own? The theory was so attractive that it took him some time to convince himself that it stood upon no solid ground whatever. Moreover, when he came to think of it, the figure lying prone had almost certainly been that of a man taller and leaner than Daniyal. It suggested Salim rather than Daniyal. But Salim was at Allahabad.

The days went by and he had almost succeeded in forgetting his last adventure, when, looking out of a back window of Gokal's house one morning, he saw the same girl chatting with the women at work over the trough for linen. He was amazed, and not a little disconcerted. What business had that creature there? What did her presence mean? In this land of subterranean connexions, in this land of rumours, denunciations, and blackmail, anything was possible. An angry, helpless suspiciousness assailed him. He went off on the spot to find Gokal; he would tell him all he knew and demand to have the girl's presence explained.

After hearing him out with great interest Gokal broke into exclamations. 'Why have you kept this from me until now? I believe I can tell you who she is at once. It must be Gunevati, the sister of poor little Vasumati. . . . Her father told me that he was going to send for her to take Vasumati's place. You say she is pretty? But she cannot be the equal of Vasumati, who was an angel of loveliness. Let me send for her and we shall see.'

Vasumati, as Hari remembered, was the girl whose

death had so deeply affected his friend, and it was plain that this news about her sister had thrown him into quite an excitement. He could not help laughing. 'Send for her later – not now.' And he explained that he hadn't the smallest wish ever to see Gunevati again. 'After what I have told you,' he went on, 'you will, I imagine, find some excuse for sending her away.'

Gokal looked a little confused. He mustn't act harshly, he objected. Her father was a devoted servant; the business would not be so simple, for the truth must be kept from the old man at all costs. Hari turned away to hide a smile, and decided to say nothing more for the moment. When Gokal had taken time to think, he could hardly fail to realize that no one of his caste and position could risk keeping a girl such as Gunevati in his neighbourhood. And, having an appointment with Lalita, he hurried off.

Of late Lalita and he had not been able to see much of one another; and in other ways, too, the outside world was making itself felt. They found it impossible to ignore the problem of the future any longer; they discussed it by the hour, but no conclusions of any kind were reached. Lalita's marriage was not yet imminent, but its shadow lay constantly between them; the girl could not refrain from bringing Prince Daniyal's name into the conversation at all moments, and this vexed Hari considerably. By nature he was not jealous and his resentment expressed itself chiefly in anger against the pressure of the world; and yet, little by little, his feelings towards Daniyal took on the colours of animosity. Four years ago, he had been entrusted by Akbar with the business of instructing the Prince in the art of

the chase, and thus he and the youth of sixteen had been thrown into a comradeship that was not one of their own choosing; and, although they had seemed to get on well enough at the time, since then they had fallen completely apart. Hari found it strange that his thoughts should once again be turned upon Daniyal through this particular chain of events. There were moments when he still dallied with the idea that it was, after all, Daniyal who had been knocked down by Lalita's horse, and if this were so, if Daniyal were in truth a Follower of the Left-hand Way, it could almost be counted a duty (as it certainly would be a pleasure) to denounce him and bring about such a scandal that the match would be broken off.

One morning, as he was acutally nursing these thoughts, on his way back from a meeting with Lalita, at a turn of the woodland path his eyes fell upon the slender figure of Gunevati, who was loitering beside the way. There was something in her aspect which suggested that the meeting was no accident, and as he came up he looked her sternly in the eyes. She saluted him with a newly-found deference, and broke at once into low-voiced entreaties, begging him to take pity upon her father and herself, and not to influence the holy Brahmin against her. The Brahmin was ready to believe in her repentance – and, in truth, she had already renounced all her evil ways. Without the protection of the holy Brahmin she and her father would wither like uprooted plants.

Hari continued to regard her stonily. He was sorely tempted to question her further on the subject of the accident, but caution prevailed. Seeing that his eyes remained unrelenting, the girl at last bowed her head.

In sadness she plucked a twig and let it fall to the ground in token of her resignation to fate.

'Your friends of the other night – let *them* care for you!' said Hari with a resolute brutality. 'Will they let you starve – you, an incarnation of the Great Goddess?'

She was silent.

Curiosity crept into Hari's fixed regard. That her companions had chosen her was no wonder, but what did she make of that call?

'I know your rites,' he continued after a moment. 'Your *upacharas*, I know them.' He threw scorn into his voice and watched for her colour to rise.

'They are not pretty – your rites!' And he laughed the laugh of disgust.

'The rites are the rites of the Great Mother.'

'You believe that? You believe in her?'

'Every one believes in her.'

He shrugged. 'Not every one worships her with those rites.'

'They are prescribed.'

'Why then are they hidden – if there is no shame?'

She was silent.

'Are you not also ashamed?'

For a moment she raised her eyes to his. 'I stand for the Divinity. I am worshipped according to the prescribed rites.'

'What of the other Divinities?'

'The Great Mother is the strongest. Kali's is the power.'

She spoke as one uttering an obvious truth, and her tone reduced Hari to speechlessness. Perhaps her unconscious cynicism was deep enough to be accounted innocence. Yes, assuredly, she had the innocence of an

animal; and yet. . . . In perplexity he said: 'But surely to you, a girl so young – those things must have seemed strange?'

She lifted her head once more and gave him a side-long glance. It was almost ironical and seemed to be accompanied by the shadow of a smile.

'Many things seem strange to a girl at first,' she replied.

With a gesture Hari left her and passed on.



THE Durbar, with a long programme of ceremonies and festivities, was now in full swing, and deeply absorbed as he was by his private affairs, Hari was obliged, like everybody else, to fall into place and play his allotted part. The calls upon Lalita's time, too, were certainly no less urgent; her betrothal to the Prince, by this time an open secret, was soon to be publicly announced, and she was already enjoying a foretaste of the honours that would soon be showered upon her. When she and Hari met together now they brought a host of preoccupations with them, and the early days of their intimacy already seemed very remote. There was no falling off of their passion, but it was beginning to be a cause of constant unrest and anxiety.

In one respect fortune continued to be kind. Prince Daniyal was not pressing his suit with any impatience and the date of the marriage remained as distant and uncertain as ever. But what was to happen in the end? What was to be the outcome of this intrigue, which was becoming more dangerous every day? Lalita, to be sure, had no notion, and up to the time of their arrival in Agra, Hari had been obstinate in his refusal to look the future in the face. His problem linked itself on one side to the question whether he had any chance of obtaining a divorce from his wife. There was not much hope of success, for the Emperor's sanction would be

necessary, and it was to be expected that the rigour of Akbar's present views on marriage would be stiffened by energetic protests from Ambissa herself. She would object with all the weight of her unquestioned virtue behind her, and public sympathy would be on her side. A divorced woman's standing was little better than a widow's; divorced, she would be obliged to retire from Court.

Any compunction that Hari might have felt on this score, had, however, been destroyed by a recent act of hers. He had just discovered that she had not only become a convert to the Emperor's new religion, but had induced his sons, who were still mere striplings, to follow her example. This action overwhelmed him with rage and wiped out his last scruples. He would have made an urgent appeal to the Emperor without another moment's delay, had any circumstances arisen to bring the second half of his programme, marriage to Lalita, anywhere within the realms of possibility.

After an interview with Ambissa, in which he gave himself the pleasure of being extremely disagreeable, he came back to Gokal and said: 'I am prepared to admit that my wife is in many ways an admirable woman. She has strength of character, a sense of duty, principles – not high, perhaps, but strong – and no vices, at least in the popular acceptation of the word. Seeing her again after a long absence I am forcibly struck by her good points.'

'But – ?'

'But – our incompatibility of temperament is complete.'

'Is she still fond of you?'

'No. In fact, I think she would hate me if her pride would allow it. She was fond of me once, perhaps; but her affection has faded with the discovery that she cannot alter my nature. She is lucky in that her boys take after her. I consider them prigs; and they, no doubt, have a corresponding opinion of me. But Ambissa loves them as no one else in the world. She is without passion, and her manless state has been irksome to her simply because, having married me, she has felt she had a right to me. Her pride has been injured by the thought of what her friends might be saying; if she has wanted me back, it was not for love's sake, but simply for the sake of appearances. There was a day when she was ambitious for me as well as for herself and her children; she wanted me to make myself a position at Court. That ambition dwindled down to the hope that I would at least live decorously by her side, while *she* worked for the family's advancement; all that she now asks is that I should provoke no scandal and allow her a good share of my income.'

This was the whole of what Hari had to say about the interview, but to her brother, the Rajah, Ambissa found a great deal more to report. Amar had chanced to come in not many minutes after Hari had made his departure, and he found her still flushed and palpitating. This agitation soon wore off, but she remained perturbed by the threat of divorce.

After listening to her recital the Rajah only smiled. 'Not even Hari,' said he, 'can find the effrontery to present himself before Akbar with the claim that your adoption of the new religion constitutes grounds for divorce. Those may very well be his private feelings – and there may be others who will sympathize with

him; but it would hardly be tactful to present that plea to the Emperor.'

With these words the Rajah passed on to another topic, for his sister's action filled him with a secret shame. Perhaps it was to be expected that in the course of time a good many among the Emperor's immediate entourage would stoop to this ignoble form of flattery, but only a few had so demeaned themselves as yet. Ambissa, in her own case, had exhibited an undignified haste, an unseemly alacrity, and, of course, in regard to the boys her conduct was monstrous.

With each day that now went by Hari realized more clearly than ever that his past relations with Lalita had been marked by a singular irresolution and that this could not possibly continue. It was actually a fact – and Gokal, whom he had taken into his confidence, was truly astonished when he heard it – that Lalita was not yet his mistress. Could he, then, at this hour, make up his mind to draw her still further into the tangle of difficulties and dangers that beset their intrigue? Past experience had taught him that the fulfilment of his passion generally marked the beginning of its decline, and now less than ever did he feel disposed to sacrifice her to what might well prove to be a passing infatuation. Nevertheless, the time had come when he had to count chiefly upon his own self-restraint, and this was possible only because he had passed beyond the age of wanton impetuosity. But he was also aware that the moment inevitably arrives when to delay makes a lover ridiculous and is apt to cost him not only what he might have had, but what he already has.

It fell to Gokal to be the witness of Hari's tortures of indecision. One day he would say: 'I shall go to Akbar

and make a desperate bid for divorce and re-marriage. Although I am older than Lalita, our marriage would give us ten years' happiness at least. And who has the right to ask for more?' Then a little later he would declare: 'Our love is real enough; but Lalita, like me, is not made for settled happiness. It is perhaps not unfortunate that our marriage is out of the question. My proper course is to run away with her. She is destined for romance, and romance thrives only on adversity. She would be happier with an outlawed lover than with a comfortable husband.' And yet an hour after he would very likely be making a great show of reason to explain that, although a life in the wilds would suit him well enough, it would certainly become intolerable to Lalita, who was habituated to all the diversions of civilization.

Against this same civilization and against Lalita's upbringing he inveighed with a concentrated bitterness. 'Don't talk to me about her parents!' he would exclaim. 'She owes them nothing at all! And I, for my part, have no scruples whatever in their regard. Her father is a big, heavy, arrogant man inflated with pride of birth; her mother is worldly and hard. Lalita's training, from her earliest years, has been calculated to turn out a young female of the greatest possible seductiveness - the idea being that her allurements should purchase her a high place in Society. All her mother's thought has gone to details of dress, deportment, and toilet. The girl has been given the equipment of a courtesan, her innocence, her virginity, being reckoned merely as an added grace. Long before vanity came to lend her patience, she was compelled to give most of her time and thought to the art of arousing

men's desire. And now, I ask, has all that been fair to her – or to *me*? A trap was set, and the wrong victim happens to have fallen into it. For victim I am; and as such, why should I be considerate towards my snarers? As for Lalita, it speaks well for her that she has not acquired the heart as well as the arts of the courtesan. It is to her honour that she has been wilful, reckless, and defiant, in her sense of wrong-doing. "We love one another!" she says; and at once it becomes a delicious and justifiable prodigality to give without thought of gain.'

Gokal was sparing in reply, having the wit to see that nothing he could say would be of any avail. In the privacy of his own mind he both marvelled and pitied, for although by nature inclined to sentiment, his ideas about love had the cut-and-dry cynicism of the pure theorist. It was true that Hari would sometimes cry out in a fury: 'What did God make young women for, if not to be seduced?' But he would also spend much time in reviewing the many excellent reasons for going no further. Most of these reasons took their point from the character of the girl herself. 'Lalita,' he explained, 'is under the tyranny of what she calls her conscience. But this conscience, the product of a schoolroom morality, is quite unsupported by true conviction. Instinct bids her obey the promptings of her heart; but her false conscience loads her with fears. It exaggerates in her that dislike of the furtive which is common to nearly all of us and amounts in reality to little more than the dread of the shame of being found out. It is much easier to defy the world with a spectacular gesture than to endure for long the strain and risk of cheating it.'

Hari was speaking with a certain bitterness because

he could not induce Lalita to shoulder even the smallest share of responsibility for the issue. She used her intelligence to evade every appeal that was made to it. Unconsciously she demanded to be coerced, and allowed every small advance in their intimacy to be followed by an intensification of her scruples and fears. For some time past their meetings had taken place in a deserted hunting-box in the Royal Hunting Grounds, a building almost exactly similar to the one in which the encounter with Gunevati had occurred. He had secretly fitted up one of the rooms with all the things required for their comfort, and in the privacy of this retreat he and she sometimes managed to spend as much as half a day together. What happened on these occasions was that, after sharing a light meal with him, Lalita would yield to his instances and stretch herself out upon the divan for a siesta. The hours they had passed upon that couch together certainly left very little value in her virginity; and now he could not help reflecting that if her surrender had been complete from the beginning they would have been saved many scruples that had worn rather thin and many heart-searchings that were likely to be useless. Even their parting, if it came, would wear an ambiguous aspect; it would come, not because they willed it, but because they had lacked the strength to will otherwise.

In this condition of affairs very little was required to precipitate a crisis. With the exception of Gokal, Hari had admitted no one into his confidence – not even the best of his women friends, Srilata Begum. And yet it was through the agency of Srilata that the crisis ultimately arose. This remarkable woman was a half-sister of Amar's and Ambissa's, but just as they bore

small resemblance to one another, so she had little in common with either of them. If, like Ambissa, she had a fondness for the world, the attraction she yielded to was of a very different order. What she looked for was not an enhancement of her own social value, but simply entertainment. If she had early dropped out of the high society so assiduously courted by Ambissa, it was for no other reason than that it bored her. A certain level of culture, a good deal of sophistication and a ready wit – this was what she demanded of her company. The air of the court was too heavy; solid virtues, solid abilities, unrelieved by finesse, did not interest her any more than commonplace stupidity or vice. On the other hand, although like Amar, she had a consciousness awake to spiritual things, she was entirely lacking in his intellectual and moral fervour and had no other aim than to live lightly. She could endure a dilettantism and triviality that positively nauseated her brother, and she was tolerant of every variety of spiritual corruption. This tolerance of villainess in others stood in singular contrast to the high standard which she set up for herself. Amar did not misunderstand her on this point, but he had no taste for visiting her house, and as for Ambissa, whilst less sensitive to its atmosphere, she shunned it simply because she felt herself to be, intellectually, at a disadvantage there.

The friendship between Hari and Srilata had arisen at a time when Ambissa had pressed her sister into the rôle of peacemaker. Hari was then living in Agra and the friendship thus initiated had quickly developed into intimacy. In Amar's eyes there was something almost as incongruous about this alliance as about



Hari's alliance with Gokal. But there it was! And the linkages between friends are notoriously hard to understand.

There would have been nothing unnatural in Hari's turning to Srilata in his perplexities and laying the whole story of his love affair before her. But this he had not done. Moreover, soon after his arrival in Agra, when Lalita mentioned to him that she had made Srilata's acquaintance, his only response – thrown out in an offhand way – was that he knew her and considered her very good company. What was not his astonishment, therefore, when now – after many weeks during which Srilata had not been mentioned – Lalita came out with the news that *she* had told Srilata everything, had poured out the whole tale of her troubles and asked for advice.

For quite an appreciable interval after hearing this Hari stared in silence. To have had recourse to a sister of Ambissa's seemed an extraordinary proceeding, but – if Lalita had really known what she was about – it showed a pretty gift of discrimination. There was a queer look in Hari's face as he asked what Srilata's advice had been. Lalita had already said that she had come away from the interview charmed, sustained, comforted; but all she could now find to answer was: 'She said it was all very difficult; one had to think . . . and why didn't you come and see her?'

Hari smiled. He recognized Srilata's loyalty, circumspection, and freedom from prejudice. He would go – of course; he promised Lalita that; and then, after they had parted, he retired into a long communion with himself. Or no! It was rather with an evocation of Srilata that he communed, and the

results were truly astonishing. Up till now he had cherished the belief that he had given his love affair a scrutiny from every possible angle. And yet, as he now rehearsed, step by step, the scene of the colloquy before him, he found that more than half his accepted ideas had to be thrown away. Hasty amendments and admissions were needful all the time – explanations that he had never seen any necessity for until now. And so it was that this puppet, animated by his own ventriloquism, became a revealer of the hard truth of things.

When this hour was over he stared aghast at the decisiveness of its results. Unavailing he took refuge in anger, expending his last energies in an exasperated attack upon Srilata herself. Who was she, after all, that he should defer to her judgment? That desiccated impartiality of hers that awarded to generosity and calculation, to pleasure and self-discipline, to quixotism and expediency, each cynically their due – how was anything valuable to emerge from it? With all the antagonistic elements in equipoise why should the scales tip in favour of this or that? And yet they did – quite definitely, and a conclusion was registered that he could not disregard. It bore the stamp – not of morality, nor of common sense, nor of expediency, nor of good taste, alone; but of an authority compounded of them all. ‘I will pay Srilata the visit she suggests,’ he said to himself. ‘But we shall not find it necessary to talk very long about my private affairs.’ And so it turned out; for a few minutes only Lalita came under discussion; there was a slight pause, and then the talk passed on.

Not many days later Hari found himself upon his

way to what was actually to be the last meeting. Completely worn out in heart and brain he dragged himself dully along. The little house, crouching under its thick cover of trees, seemed to look out at him slyly as he approached it; the room that had been the shelter of his secret intimacy wore a blank face, had a blank silence, that seemed to convey a sneer. A kind of shame mixed with a kind of self-scorn kept him standing there, in the middle of the floor, to survey this and that familiar object with an expression of distaste. At last, however, he sat down and with fixed gaze simply waited.

Lalita's countenance, when she came in, gave him a reflection of his own inward state. The smile she summoned quickly flickered out, and in his arms she held herself stiff and cold, her sad eyes staring widely before her. Yes, her capacity for feeling had run out just like his; so here they stood in the end, without spirit, in the clutches of an unhappiness that had stripped even itself of grace.

He said: 'I came prepared, as you know. . . . But is this actually our last meeting?'

Mutely she inclined her head.

'You say it must be?'

'Yes, it must – it must.'

A wave of bitterness passed over him. 'All the same you will find – when I have gone out of your life . . .'

He could not finish. Her face had quivered into an expression of unhappiness that he could not bear. In silence they drew apart and seated themselves upon the divan; in silence they stared at the truth. What they were submitting to was the inadequacy of their love – that wretched love, which, nevertheless, had such power

to torment them. In the face of this spiritual impotence nothing remained to be said – nothing true, at any rate, that was worth saying and nothing worth saying that was true.

‘I suppose,’ he said, ‘I suppose we shall both get over this more quickly than we think.’ And when she gave no sign of having heard him he went on: ‘You will have plenty to distract you at all events. And then this charming marriage. . . . I hear that your mother is giving a reception for the Prince to-night.’

‘No. To-morrow night.’

‘To-morrow? No matter. To-morrow . . . and then the next day . . . there will always be something. We won’t think about each other more than we can help.’

Again he lost himself in his misery. But his eyes fastened upon the sunlight outside. In the freedom of the sky, with the rush of the wind behind them, clouds were flying. Only Lalita and he were imprisoned in misery; shut up in the circle of their insistent memories and the craving of the heart.

All at once her hand shot out, sought his and closed upon it. He returned the pressure of her fingers for one moment and then rose to his feet. The quicker this was all over the better. But he wanted to find something deeply felt first – a word to remember having spoken. Standing a little way back he regarded her intently. With perversity he sought to extract from these instants the full measure of their pain; he revived his most blissful memories; he jeered at himself over his loss.

‘Come!’ he said at last, and invited her to rise.

She paid no attention to his outstretched hand; she sat looking straight before her.

'I love you,' she said in a low voice, 'and I am terribly unhappy.'

He began a gesture and then checked it.

'Come!' he said again.

She rose and together they left the house. After locking the door behind them, he walked by her side along the narrow path. A few moments brought them within sight of the groom who was holding her horse.

He said: 'I think we had better not write.'

She winced. 'You think not?'

'If we are never to see one another again. . . .'

'We might write just once,' she murmured.

After a moment's thought he nodded. Yes; they might write just once – to amend this parting.

The groom was now quite near and their steps, which had retarded, stopped at last completely. 'Good-bye, Lalita,' he said very low.

She looked at him, caught at her breath, and then turned and ran to her mount. On his side he walked rapidly away.

ALL these weeks Amar had been working diligently in the pursuit of his various ends, and by no means without success. He had settled some troublesome question here, safeguarded his rights there; and now his little principality, he could say, stood as firm and sound outside and in as it was possible to make it. None of this, however, had been accomplished without effort, and it had been brought home to him afresh that he and Akbar were not made to understand one another. Had he been more fortunate in this respect he might have effected in half an hour what had actually cost him many weeks of difficult indirect negotiation. Altogether, he was not sorry that this season was drawing to a close; he had found Imperial court functions excessively tedious; and the tone of the society at Fatehpur-Sikri was – just as he knew it would be – much less agreeable than that of his own little court. He had been prepared for a good deal of ostentation and even a certain grossness; but it was not the prevailing lack of taste that had displeased him most. Far worse was the atmosphere, heavy and thunderous with intrigue.

At the forefront of his mind during the whole period there stood, naturally, the question of his retirement from the world, and this preoccupation enclosed him in a secret cell from which he watched, with gathering disquietude, the increasing pressure of rivalry between

the two great factions in the Empire. There was a party which, whilst remaining loyal to Akbar, cherished the hope that the Emperor would make concessions to Salim and name him as his successor to the Throne. The other party fastened its ambitions upon Prince Daniyal; it was to this party that Ambissa belonged; and from the first she had strongly, if rather mysteriously, urged her brother to attach himself to it. This, however, the Rajah was not entirely prepared to do. So closely had Daniyal managed to seclude himself within the circle of his own particular friends, so adroitly had he avoided the ordinary run of court functions, that although it had been one of the Rajah's principal objects to make his acquaintance, he found his time at Agra drawing to a close without having done better than to catch sight of the Prince once or twice in the dim distance. Ambissa had promised more than once to bring about a meeting, but somehow nothing had come of it. On the other hand she missed no opportunity of assuring him that Daniyal was charming, that his faults were only those of youth, that he stood very high in his father's esteem, and that he would almost certainly be chosen for the Throne. Amar allowed these words no more than their proper weight; and when, after many weeks, he discovered by chance that Ambissa's acquaintance with Daniyal was of the slightest, he was more irritated than surprised. But, he reflected, her confidence in the young man's future must be strong indeed, if, instead of giving way to pique at her virtual exclusion from his circle, she still obstinately spoke well of him. The explanation probably was that, as a woman of principle, she felt obliged to entertain a high

opinion of the man to whose party she was giving her allegiance.

At the moment that this last reflection was passing through his mind, the Rajah became aware of a certain moral discomfort. It sometimes happened thus. After criticizing Ambissa he would be stung by the query whether those same strictures would not, in some degree, apply to himself. Of course he did want to convince himself that Daniyal's was the right side to take, but that was very different from wanting to deceive oneself, surely? Right at the beginning he had admitted Gokal into his confidence and obtained from him the promise that he would watch over Jali during his minority and help Sita with advice; but he had not then been able to speak definitely about his policy. Animated by new scruples, he now went to Gokal again and exposed fully the trend of his recent activities. He supposed, he said, that Gokal would agree that the road he had been mapping out for Sita and Jali was, all things considered, the right one.

To his astonishment Gokal demurred. And although, when pressed for his reasons, he lapsed into inarticulacy, Amar gathered that he had formed an unfavourable opinion of Daniyal's private character. But Gokal also protested that he knew very little about the Prince and advised Amar to seek information elsewhere. Upon this Amar bethought him of Srilata, and going to her house the next day he discovered, to his extreme surprise, that Daniyal was quite a friend of hers. This fact Ambissa – although she must certainly have known it – had not thought fit to communicate to him; and he began to think that a good deal of the time he had spent in listening to her had been wasted.



Once again, however, he made the experience that Srilata's *milieu* was decidedly uncongenial. Her rooms were crowded with people whose appearance and manners he did not much care about, and the only person in the house that he knew was Mabun Das. After arranging to come again for a quiet talk the next day, he left precipitately, but with the feeling that he would probably have done better to stay. There was no sense in holding oneself superior to Mabun Das, who was a man of ability and obviously destined to rise high in the world, and as for the empty-headed, affected youths who figured so largely among Srilata's guests, they were very likely members of Daniyal's set, whom it would have been worth his while to study a little, especially as it was too late now to get Srilata to arrange a meeting with Daniyal himself, for the Prince – she had just told him this – was on the point of leaving for the hills.

The next afternoon, as he was being ushered out into the peach-garden at the back of Srilata's house, he heard a voice under the pagoda and recognized it as Hari's. It was a long time since he had come across his brother-in-law or even thought of him, although his mind had at first gone back occasionally to Hari's unaccountable behaviour six weeks ago; and once or twice he had gone so far as to wonder whether Hari might not have been actuated by some mad impulse to make advances to Sita. But that idea had never really formed itself fully, and after Ambissa's complaint of Hari's threat to divorce her it was completely extinguished. He had argued that if Hari was really anxious for a divorce, the reason must be that he wanted to marry again; and that in its turn could only mean

that he was in love with some unmarried girl whose favours he could not obtain outside wedlock.

To find Hari here now did not suit him very well because he wanted to conduct his inquiries confidentially, and even, if possible, without making Srilata over-curious as to his reasons for taking so special an interest in the young Prince's character. The first words spoken, however, showed him that his arrival had not been so unhappily timed after all.

'Do come to my aid!' Srilata called out. 'Hari is taking me to task for being a friend of Prince Daniyal's.'

'Perhaps,' answered Amar, smiling, 'I, too, should be taking you to task, if I knew rather more about the Prince.'

Hari gave a short laugh. 'My impression,' said he rather drily, 'has always been that you shared Srilata's partiality.' And then, turning to his hostess, he went on: 'Give him your latest piece of news; I shall be interested to see how he takes it.'

His tone was rather surly and he was looking, Amar thought, decidedly out of sorts. The next moment, however, the Rajah's attention was entirely taken up by what Srilata was saying; she had heard that Prince Daniyal was about to make a public and spectacular declaration of his conversion to his august father's new religion.

This came as an unpleasant surprise, but, instinctively, Amar dissimulated. 'Have you got that on really good authority? As you must know, people for some time have been speculating. . . .'

Srilata nodded to express her certainty and then went on to tell the following story: 'One evening, about a week ago, the Prince called at this house dressed in a

wonderful flowing robe of white and silver with the words "Allahu Akbar" embroidered upon his breast. He paraded up and down the room in front of me with great delight – you know what a child he is in such matters – and when I complimented him, he told me that he had designed the costume himself. I then said – quite foolishly, I'm afraid – that I supposed it was intended for a fancy-dress ball. He laughed, and looking at me rather queerly, answered: "You are right; that's what it is – fancy dress!" And now – just think – I have heard that that marvellous robe is what he has designed for himself in the character of high priest in the Din Ilahi. Apparently he is to be raised to an important position in the new religious hierarchy almost at once.'

Srilata was laughing, and Amar pretended to take the matter in the same spirit, but, in reality, he was a good deal put out. He realized that the Prince's decision had great political significance, but even more important to him was the light shed upon the young man's character. The trouble lay here. It was not for himself that he was settling a future policy; it was for Sita. And that made a world of difference. For his part he found little difficulty in sifting out questions of personality from questions of policy, but Sita was otherwise constituted. And once one had recognized that, it became impossible, obviously, to commit her to an allegiance that would be offensive to her own personal standards.

After a little Hari got up and went away, and then Amar took the bull by the horns. 'Now listen, my dear Srilata, I am just at the end of my stay here and all my policy has been orientated in the direction of Daniyal.

It has seemed fairly obvious to me that Daniyal was to be preferred to his brother, who is an ill-educated, drunken boor and a rebel to boot. It is true that I know Daniyal only by report; but report does not appear to have anything very serious against him. I understand that he is trivial-minded, an amateur of the Arts, and without much sense of the responsibilities of his position; but what is there in that? He appears to appreciate the worth of serious men such as Abu-l-Fazl, Man Singh, and Mobarek, and so long as these stand behind him and make up for his deficiencies, the Empire will not get out of gear. Well, I was saying this to Gokal the other day, when, to my surprise, he began to murmur and mutter against Daniyal. And when I pressed him for his objections he did nothing but continue his mutterings. All I could get out of him in the end was this: "Prince Daniyal is a leader of fashion." "

With these last words Amar gave a little laugh, raised his eyebrows, and fixed his sister with a look of patient questioning. Srilata laughed, too, but on rather a dubious note, and as her answer did not come at once, he went on: 'Now, what is it that lies at the bottom of Gokal's prejudice? What inspires Hari, too, with such a decided antipathy? Surely you, my dear Srilata, who are by way of liking the Prince, can give me a little enlightenment?'

'I have never said I *liked* him,' Srilata protested, after a moment's pause; 'but I admit, he amuses me.'

'Ah! he amuses you,' sighed Amar.

'Yes. Of course he is really trivial in character, as you say, but – well, there must be some frivolity in the world, my dear Amar! And then . . .'

She did not finish her sentence, and for a while Amar studied her in silence. She was thinking of him, he well knew, as a little cramped by prudishness. In his view, on the other hand, her placid overlooking of moral standards simply meant that her taste was one-sided, incomplete. Perhaps even she halted, with most of the world, at that stage where immorality still retains a certain glamour. Nor was she sophisticated enough to hold sophistication cheap.

‘If Daniyal is merely trivial,’ he said slowly, ‘I don’t see how he can be – even amusing.’

Srilata disliked argument. ‘He has, at any rate, a light touch.’ And her glance was faintly ironic.

‘A light touch!’ murmured Amar. ‘He has a light touch. He is a leader of fashion. He is amusing.’

Over this he knit his brows with exaggerated concentration. ‘Should *I* think him amusing?’ he asked, with seeming innocence.

‘I don’t think you would.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said Amar, still pondering. ‘Perhaps merely foolish.’

He was hoping to prick Srilata into saying something more, but he failed; and in silence he reflected that her indications, as far as they went, were satisfactory. If Daniyal was a nonentity, he could proceed without scruple along the path that he had chosen. He would explain matters to Sita and she would rest content.

When he next looked up it was to meet Srilata’s eyes. They were satirical; obviously she was being reticent. How irritating people sometimes were!

As if not unaware of his feelings she gave a little laugh of apology. ‘You were talking of Gokal just now; surely one reason for his not liking Daniyal has suggested

itself to you? Behind Daniyal there stands Mobarek, and Mobarek, as you know, is far from being a friend of Gokal's. Then, as for Hari's dislike of Daniyal, don't you remember that those two were sent off on a hunting expedition together three or four years ago? Well, I imagine that Hari might very easily have taken a dislike to the Prince then.'

This was all very reasonable, and Amar nodded his assent. Perhaps, after all, he was becoming fanciful about Daniyal. In any case, there was nothing more to be got out of Srilata; and yet, just before leaving the house, something impelled him to round upon her and say: 'Tell me this, what should *I* think of Daniyal, if I knew him as well as you?'

Srilata's face became thoughtful. 'He is not the kind of person you could approve of,' she said quietly.

So it was with this, which was just what he did not want to hear, that Amar finally took his leave.

ON the eve of their departure to the Hills Sita and Jali drove over to Gokal's pavilion to say good-bye. The sky was overcast, the afternoon warm and still. As they trotted along under the trees, a vague sadness oppressed them both; and Sita knew that her depression had very little to do with leaving Agra, but she was uncertain about Jali. Jali had developed a great affection for Gokal, who had been giving him the course of spiritual instruction proper to a boy emerging out of childhood. She reminded him that Gokal would be joining them shortly.

As soon as they reached the little wicket-gate Jali dived in among the trees. It was his habit now, outside the hours of his instruction, to wander away into the woods; and there he would remain hidden until they called to him that it was time to go back. So Sita went on alone up the little path by the lake side; and Gokal, who was sitting upon the terrace under a large umbrella, looked up from his book and saw her coming, and forthwith took his horn spectacles from off his nose and rose to meet her with a smile of pleasure. She was looking, he thought, more charming than ever, and this admiration was no doubt reflected in his smile. At any rate, Sita's heart warmed towards him and she returned his unspoken compliment with the laughing declaration that his figure, as he sat there on the terrace, had all the dignity and serenity of Buddha.

They had not been talking together for very long before she was tempted to introduce the subject of Hari. She and Hari had scarcely seen each other at all in the last weeks, his confidences had never been renewed, and so she was left with a good deal of unsatisfied curiosity. The question that kept cropping up in her mind was: 'Is he really in love? Is he capable of being really and truly in love?' But to ask Gokal for his opinion was not a thing that she could allow herself to do. Almost certainly it would not be possible for him to give an answer without falling into some breach of confidence. Moreover, there was another matter in her mind beside which all others sank into insignificance, and upon this other matter she was fully resolved to speak. For some time past something in Amar's manner had given her a suspicion that he might be contemplating retirement from the world. She had said nothing; she shrank from questioning him about it; it seemed to her that she hardly had the right to question; the first word ought to come from his side. But there was no reason why she should not sound Gokal; it would be easy for him to put her off should he wish to; he could say he knew nothing.

The conversation in the meantime had come round to the Din Ilahi, and Gokal's earlier cheerfulness was clouding over. Did she remember, he asked, that little old man with whom she had seen him talking not many days ago? Well, that was Shaik Mobarek, and Shaik Mobarek had visited him again only the other day in order to bring the news of Prince Daniyal's conversion. Furthermore, this meant that the Din Ilahi was to be publicly proclaimed.

In the pause that Gokal made here, Sita remained



silent. She was trying to interpret his words in their full significance. She knew that those who adopted the Din Ilahi had to abjure their former faith and renounce their right of judgment on matters of belief, accepting the Emperor as sole and infallible interpreter of God's will upon earth. But Amar had also told her that in itself, and apart from this, the new religion contained nothing positively bad. It was a Theism broad and simple enough to include everything and signify nothing. Why, then, should Gokal, who was notoriously latitudinarian, take on quite so grave an air? She could not help suspecting that his main concern must be personal; he must be worrying about his own position and the dignities which self-respect might force him to renounce. She sympathized, but her sympathy was tinged with impatience, for she had always thought that Gokal valued the world too highly. She wouldn't call him a snob – oh no! he would never, for instance, sacrifice a friendship – but in his transactions with the world he must surely have made more than a few little sacrifices of self-esteem. How, otherwise, could he have attained to his actual position at Court? Not through intellectual eminence alone could any man, however highly gifted, hope to stand high in the world.

'Mobarek came to crow over me,' continued Gokal sadly. 'To him all this is a triumph, while in my eyes it is a disaster. I am convinced that Akbar is committing a terrible folly. And yet,' he went on after a silence, 'I abstain from condemning him. I know no standard by which such men can be properly judged. The ordinary canons do not apply to Men of Destiny. Such men may be speaking truly when they impute

their actions to the decrees of fate. They feel themselves to be the vehicles of a purpose which they do not understand. This is their greatness, if it is also their limitation. In a sense they are puppets.'

'But Akbar is not merely a man of action,' objected Sita, 'he is a thinker, a philosopher, as well.'

Gokal gave a smile. 'Akbar is a mystic rather than a thinker. Mind you, I do not wish to suggest that mysticism and hard thinking are necessarily incompatible. Thought carried far enough passes beyond its own sphere, or rather becomes aware of its own limitations. It sees the human reason operating in the ocean of being as a special limited kind of activity. But Akbar's inner life is emotional rather than intellectual. He is no thinker.'

'At any rate,' answered Sita, 'he is a seeker after God. Who can doubt it after setting eyes upon the Gate of Victory at Fatehpur-Sikri and reading the inscription over the arch? "Said Jesus, on whom be peace: The world is a bridge. Pass over it, but build no house therein. Who hopes for an hour hopes for Eternity. Spend the hour in prayer. The rest is unknown." ' There was a thrill in her voice as she spoke, and she added: 'Akbar is almost a Christian.'

Gokal's hand made a gesture in the air: he smiled and kept his peace.

For a space, during which their eyes rested upon the lake, there was no sound but the cooing of the pigeons in the trees. How lovely the water was with the shadows lengthening over it! Not a breath ruffled its surface; it reflected glassily the faint warm colours of the sultry sky. As her thoughts wandered, Sita's face became dreamy. It was a face, thought Gokal, the

beauty of which deepened in tranquillity. It was like the lake. Even so did her beauty shine forth, self-subsistent, an answer that was yet no answer. . . . And he sighed.

'I want you to tell me something,' she said, turning towards him suddenly. 'For some time past – I really do not know how long – there has been a feeling in my heart that Amar . . .'

No reply came to fill her pause, but Gokal kept his eyes fixed upon her, and she saw them gradually deepen with a grave and speaking sympathy.

'Will it be soon?' she asked, her voice very low.

'Not too soon. . . . No, he will do everything rightly.'

So it had come at last! For thirteen years they had been married and it seemed to her now that this was what she had unconsciously begun to expect before half those years had gone by. She was not startled, only saddened. But resolutely she thrust her sadness aside; it was not that she wanted to think about.

'I understand. But it will be difficult for him to leave Jali and – and everything. . . . Yes,' she continued tonelessly and with far-gazing eyes, 'I understand, and yet it seems to me strange.'

'In our country, as you know, men often do this thing. At a certain age, after a man has discharged his duty as husband, father, and citizen, he responds to another call.'

'You are a strange people. But perhaps I can understand.'

He sighed, partly from relief.

'And yet, how can God be served,' she went on

suddenly, 'if not in this world – the world into which he has sent us?'

'The value of service,' returned Gokal gently, 'is recognized by Brahmin and Buddhist alike. The *Upanishad* says: "In darkness are they who worship only the world, but in greater darkness they who worship the infinite alone. He who accepts both saves himself from death by the knowledge of the former and attains immortality by the knowledge of the latter." Buddha, too, has said much the same thing. Where we differ from you is in our recognition of the value of holiness. In our minds the relation of man to man is secondary, right conduct following naturally when the relation of man to God is made perfect. Moreover, there is no greater benefit that a man can confer upon his fellows than the example of his own spiritual achievement. We have a saying: "The perfume of a flower travels before the wind, but the perfume of holiness travels even against the wind."'

'Amar has love in his heart,' continued Gokal, speaking low and urgently, 'but he believes that love should be indistinguishable from compassion, and that compassion should be exercised through the understanding rather than through the emotions. Love, therefore, should be a recognition of the unity of all consciousness, a comprehension of the goal of all consciousness, and a desire to assist all fellow-creatures towards that goal.'

'You can read many of my thoughts,' said Sita. 'Don't you then also know that I shall never be able to accept Amar's view of life?'

'I, myself, do not accept it,' answered Gokal after a moment's pause, 'neither do I reject it entirely. I think

that you of the western world should consider carefully whether you have not made an error in idealizing the will to live. Life! The enrichment of life! The intensification of life! The prolongation of life into eternity! Does this obsession have any heartfelt meaning behind it? Do these notions contain a coherent ideal at their core? Buddhism says no! and waits in silence until the intoxication is over, until the commotion has died down.'

'So all the world is to turn Buddhist in the end?' And Sita shook her head. 'No, I, for my part, shall always affirm what Amar denies. Between us there is a gulf.'

Gokal leaned forward earnestly. 'The gulf lies not between those who affirm and those who deny, but between those who affirm and those who ignore. Listen!' he went on, 'I believe that between your affirmations and our denials there is, in reality, little more than a long difference of mental habit. Fundamentally your mind and Amar's are similar in type; you both raise the same problems and the answers you give are the same in essence, if their substance is not the same. You advocate life's intensification, Amar its extinguishment; but you both recognize imperfection and you both aim at perfection. Your goal is the same whatever names you give it.'

Sita was silent for a moment, then she stretched out her hand. 'Gokal, you are very kind to me. I shall turn to you in the days to come.'

After the sound of her voice had died away the stillness that fell seemed to hold a particular significance. They sat looking before them, looking at the sheet of luminous water that made a great emptiness at their

feet. The dull reddish tints of the sky were reflected in it; the emptiness stretched beneath and above.

At last Gokal drew a long breath that was also a sigh. 'I hope I shall be wiser for you than I am for myself.'

These words were pronounced in a tone that seemed to mark them for his ear alone. It was in quite another voice that he presently resumed speech. He fell into a discourse on Akbar, on the Empire, on the eternal problems of life and religion. Listening, Sita felt that a little while ago she had done him an injustice. His grave voice carried her into new domains of thought. It was as if he had rapt her up on to some mountain height and were pointing with outstretched arm over unexplored regions of the world.

### XIII

It was not until she reached the freshness of the foothills that Sita realized what a dust of weariness had settled down upon her spirit at Agra. Although it was against her intentions she had been drawn further and further into the vortex of festivities at Fatchpur-Sikri, and even her friendships in the Agra Palace had suffered from the rivalries and jealousies that emanated from the Imperial Court. It was depressing to look back on. So much time and energy devoted to formal pomposities or else expended upon small frivolities and trivial excitements into which one had to infuse a gaiety that did not naturally belong to them. However, she could now console herself with the thought that it was not altogether a mistake to give that way of living an occasional trial, for one returned with an even greater content to the pleasures that came to one by nature.

The country through which they were now passing did actually remind her of the Caucasus. Its torrents and flowery meadows, its heavy forests and cool, dewy nights – these brought back not only the memories, but the actual feelings that had been hers in early days. She thought of her parents and their friends, of all the old life that wars and disasters had broken up. It seemed very far away now; and yet that dimness and distance were still home. Memory revived made the civilization into which she had been transplanted seem outlandish again.

Jali was almost the age that she had been when her father had fled from the Caucasus; but how strangely different the type of childhood he presented! What would she have said in those days if he had been shown to her in a dream as the boy who was to be her own son? As she considered this, it struck her that he had changed a good deal during their stay at Agra, but she could not define exactly in what the change consisted. A great part of his aloofness and timidity had gone; he was more boyish now and carried himself with more spirit. But there was something, all the same, in these recent developments that she did not altogether like. 'People are changing little by little the whole time,' she thought, 'but one only notices it at a special moment by a special opening of the eyes.'

She was standing before the door of her tent as these reflections drifted through her mind. It was the seventh day of their journey, the plains already seemed to lie far beneath them, and suddenly, against the light of the setting sun, there hobbled up an old woman, hideously bowed and seamed and withered by her years. She held out a shaking hand and said: 'Great Lady, may many years and much love stand between you and me!' Sita made no reply, but called to her maid for money and held out some coins in a hand that trembled as much as the old crone's. Yes, the day would surely arrive when for her, too, weariness and bodily decrepitude would stretch a veil over the beauty of the world, making its songs and its flowers and its joys dim and remote. Nor was that all. She would feel that she no longer formed a part of the world's beauty herself. Nothing would be left then but



a husk, a shell, a failing old woman, who had once been happy and young.

With a mumbled blessing the old hag shuffled away, and Sita's eyes fell upon Jali, who, a little way off, was sitting crosslegged upon the ground. He sounded a few notes upon a *vina*, and presently, in the thin nasal tone of the people, struck up one of the common songs that he knew:

Dearest Lord, what art thou?

Thou art the tiny bundle

Which thine own

Little mad woman

Holds always to her heart.

Little mad woman, I,

And thou her precious bundle, her darling treasure,  
Of old torn rags.

On these my head,

When I am wearied by the dusty road,

Rests and I sleep in peace.

Men in the streets point at me,

Laugh at me,

And throw dust.

Some try to pluck thee from my heart;

'Cast him away!' they cry.

Rama! Rama! But how

Could thy mad beggar-woman live without thee?

Little mad woman without her lord, her love?

No. I hurry past.

Hugging thee to my breast,

I go on alone,

Smiling because this mad, mad heart of mine,

Holding thee, holdeth love.

The tears sprang into Sita's eyes, and hiding her face from Jali, she turned and went into the tent. The setting sun sent a dusky glow through the canvas. In the red dusk of the tent she wept for loneliness, while the thin chant of compassionate indifference went on outside. Jali was his father's son; alien like his father; and she longed for her native land and for a people unlike these, whose very tenderness floated upon waters of resignation and sorrow.

Every day their march took them higher into the thin cool air of the hills. From their turning, twisting path they looked down over the heads of dark deodars and huge blossoming rhododendrons. In the early morning, when they made their start, the sun and the mist would still be competing, and then, for half an hour after the mist had vanished, a million dewdrops sparkled on the dark needles of every pine.

For many days after her arrival at Khanjo, Sita did little but wander in the woods, and she found herself taking a delight in them that at times was almost ecstatic. Her spirit melted into an exquisite closeness to the whole visible world; and the visible world she felt to be a garment of God. On coming home in the evening she would find Amar still dreamy from his meditations. In his mind the enjoyment of beauty was not an end in itself, nor even a means of approach to the ultimate goal. It took its place among the higher pleasures, but it was only subsidiary. The Path guided you away from the sensuous world altogether, away from yourself, away from the ardours of earth even at their keenest and purest. Her nature rebelled against this outlook and her companionship with Amar was spoilt by a sense of ceaseless, silent tension.

It was not very long before Gokal arrived, taking up his residence in a house on the other side of the little valley. He arrived in holiday mood, and this cheerful unconcern of his was so marked that one day she questioned Amar about it. How did he account for Gokal's high spirits, seeing that the political situation had certainly not taken any turn for the better and that he himself flippantly declared that his own personal prospects were past praying for? Amar's reply somewhat dismayed her, for she learnt that Gokal was now living in open concubinage with a low-caste girl of fifteen, whom he had brought up to the hills in his train. Such conduct in Gokal was astonishing, but she was perhaps less astonished by the action itself than by the change which it had wrought in his disposition. It seemed pitiful that the whole mental outlook of such a man should be dependent on so trivial a circumstance. After thinking for several moments she asked: 'What is the girl like?' And Amar replied that she was quite without character, intelligence, taste or moral sense. 'Then how lovely she must be!' thought Sita, and she sighed, for she was not unlike other women in her inability to decide whether the value which men set on mere beauty was a matter for laughter or tears. Be this as it might, Gokal's love affair seemed to be dreadfully lacking in the elements of poetry or romance; and yet, apparently, it sufficed to distract him, not only from his personal worries, but from all the higher preoccupations that had taken so important a place in his life. Weakness like this was lamentable. Intellectually men had a higher vocation than women. But how often men showed themselves inferior to women in their careless profanation of love. A woman saw

the beauty of love and instinctively cherished it. A woman saw that in this confused, fragmentary world love was the only power that could fuse a life into a unity and endow it with form and significance. It was wrong of men to profane love in their thoughts and deeds, for all love was in its essence beautiful – even the most passionate earthly love.

A few weeks later, when Hari arrived, his temper presented a decided contrast to Gokal's, and Sita realised quickly enough what the nature of his trouble was. The last time she had seen him in Agra she had made a guess that his love affair must be turning out unhappily. His moodiness, his sombreness, now amply confirmed her suspicions and she said to herself with emphasis that he certainly deserved no better fortune. All the same, her memory of how he had taken her into his confidence soon injected a little sympathy into her ironical view of his plight. Besides, he did present in his gloom a figure of greater dignity, at any rate, than Gokal, whose complacency had become positively distasteful to her since she had discovered its cause. Thank goodness, Hari's love affair stood on a higher level than that! There was evidence, in his present dejection, that he had at least put some genuine feeling into it. She could believe that it had been a romance and not a mere loveless gallantry.

NOTWITHSTANDING his absorption in his own private concerns Hari had found it impossible entirely to neglect everything outside; and, rather strangely, it turned out that at the very time when his love affair was ending its unhappy course, in the eye of the world he was achieving quite a success. First of all, having discovered why it was that he lay under the cloud of the Emperor's displeasure, he had applied himself to putting the matter to rights. The trouble was just what Ambissa had surmised; his visits to Mahomet Hakim Ali at Kabul had been reported at certain high quarters; and when, a little later, it was discovered that he had left Kabul in disguise, suspicion arose that he might be bound for Allahabad with treasonable messages for Prince Salim. The Emperor's secret police had, accordingly, made efforts to trace him. For two months Mabun Das had been searching all in vain, and then, lo and behold! he had turned up on the terrace of the palace at Agra.

Wisely, Hari had lost no time in having an explanation with Mabun Das. There was just enough truth in the suspicion that he was a sympathizer of Salim's to make him anxious to dispel that idea. His story to Mabun was that he had been hunting wild goat in the mountains, and, as far as he could judge, Mabun believed him. Then, some weeks later, he had had a long private audience with Akbar and had succeeded

so well in dispelling the last vestiges of the Emperor's ill humour that he received, the next day, the gift of an embroidered tunic and a jewelled dagger. After this his return into favour had proceeded with a rapidity that had created considerable astonishment. The professional courtiers were not very well pleased; but the jealousy he aroused did not go deep, as it was easy to see that he was not an ambitious-minded competitor.

After his parting with Lalita he had no other wish than to obtain a complete change of scene, and he would certainly have indulged this longing, had not his engagements at court been absolutely binding. As it was, he went to the opposite extreme and threw himself into the thick of social activities. There were days when this regime was moderately successful, but efforts made so unspontaneously soon led to exhaustion, and then he would sink back into an even blacker gloom. Whenever he allowed his memories free play, the pain became agonizing. The contrast between his past happiness and his present misery overwhelmed him. How rich and warm and full life had seemed whilst he was in the summer of his love! Now, how completely he was wintered!

He had lost no time in writing to Lalita, because his one idea now was to put the past out of mind. Her reply wakened but little emotion. He read it with a frown, tore it up into fragments and threw them away. He had feared remorse, but this – the most incalculable of emotions – was spared him. He felt none, not even when he got a second letter in which she said: 'How long will this misery continue? I don't see how I shall ever manage to live without you. Time seems to do no good.'

And yet her pain, he knew, was real enough. He no longer argued that had her love been stronger it would have swept aside the obstacles in its way. No; he accepted the fact that love renounced has a pain that cannot be measured by the motives of the renunciation; and yet he regarded both his sufferings and hers with a certain measure of contempt. She would get over her grief because she was young, and he because he was middle-aged.

Great was his relief when at length he was able to leave Agra, and on his journey up to the Hills there were days when he fostered the illusion that he was cured. Then, very gingerly, he would begin fingering his wounds. He would let Lalita's image float before his eyes just to see whether the old pain had really been stifled to death. Sometimes the stab and sting did not return; and then his heart leapt up at this confirmation of his hope. But an hour later perhaps his eye would fall upon some girl who had a turn of figure, or a gesture, or a look, that resembled Lalita's, and then the sun would darken and the icy chill of bereavement would re-envelop him. Then he felt his spirit shrivel again. All in a moment he became old and weak and sick. When these accesses came upon him he had to rush away into solitude, and later, when the pain had spent itself, he was exhausted and without the wish to live.

In these hours of misery he could not look for consolation from Gokal, for Gokal was in a frame of mind that put him entirely out of sympathy with troubles such as this. Moreover, he could not let his thoughts dwell upon Gokal's position without suffering from self-reproach. It was not until he arrived at Khanjo

that he became aware that Gokal had committed the dreadful imprudence of bringing Gunevati with him, and he now saw that, having long ago received some indication of what was afoot, he might well have attempted, before it was too late, to dissuade his friend from slipping into an entanglement that was set about with fearful risks. Having noticed that Gokal's innocent affection for Vasumati was in danger of transferring itself to her sister, why had he not foreseen all the rest? Although it was true that Brahminical discipline had relaxed under the influence of Mongol rule, commerce between a Brahmin and a girl in the position of Gunevati was, by all current notions, an offence of unthinkable heinousness.

Gokal was relying, as he now explained, upon the remoteness and seclusion of the spot. He argued that if ever a rumour should escape into the outer world, time and distance would so greatly have weakened it that his bare denials would suffice. But Hari shook his head over this; everything, in the last resort, would depend upon Akbar, and Akbar was no longer to be counted on.

The Emperor was becoming more and more deeply committed to his new religion; he could not allow it to be a failure without great loss of prestige. His endeavours were now directed on obtaining the support of the Brahmins, and many were yielding to threats, cajolery, and bribes. Gokal had not yet been approached, but it was beyond doubt that the day of his trial would come. If his position had been insecure even before, what did it look like now?

It was curious to observe with what equanimity Gokal was flying in the face of the worst dangers.



Moreover, in thus indulging himself in all the pleasures that he had hitherto so rigorously eschewed, he seemed even to be finding a certain spiritual satisfaction. There was more than a little humour and self-directed malice in the commentaries that he passed upon himself and his infatuation. 'My dear Hari,' he would say, 'my alliance with Gunevati, so far from being incongruous, as Amar seems to think, is the most natural and fitting conjunction in the world. In me you find the intellectual weary of his brain-spun cobwebs; in Gunevati the child of nature, a proper toy for a second childhood such as mine. The society of Gunevati is a perpetual refreshment to me. Before meeting her I had no idea how far I had travelled from the simple, the elementary. Sometimes, before making some remark to her, I try to forecast what her response will be, but, when it comes, its glorious and unimaginable crudity never fails to give me a delicious shock. How uninteresting is the educated mind in comparison with hers! Thought crystallizes into patterns of a merely formal complexity; but the instincts, with all the richness of their irrationality, belong to the creative side of life. Animal instinct, embroidered over with the arabesques of the imagination, how can you better me that? I am tired not only of second-rate thinkers, but even of the first-rate. How many there are who think only for the sake of thinking, and what dullards they make of themselves! I shall probably settle down in this spot with Gunevati for the rest of my days, and if I write a book it will be too true for men to understand.'

To all this Hari would reply with a laugh and a shrug. There was no use in giving warnings to a man

in such a mood. But he prayed that Gokal would tire of Gunevati before she tired of him, for when that happened she would either poison him or run away.

In this quiet upland valley the days slipped by very uneventually; there was not even much communication between Gokal's house and Amar's, although now and again of an evening Gokal and Hari would stroll over to sit upon Amar's veranda in the moonlight; and then long, desultory conversations would take place to the accompaniment of the hooting owls. Hari, as a rule, said very little, and when he did speak he was apt to be bitter and contentious.

'You talk of loyalty to Akbar,' he broke out on one occasion, 'but, I ask you, what reason has any one of us to be loyal? That man has robbed us of everything! Independence, initiative, responsibilities, all are gone! And now, it seems, freedom of thought is about to go too! Egoists like Akbar suck up all the virtue in the soil around them; even the lives of their friends are stunted and starved. I have always declared that we should be better off under Salim. He is something of a scoundrel no doubt, but anything is preferable to a full-blooded tyrant.'

No one replied to this tirade; but the next day he and Sita happened to be left alone together for a few moments. 'I was surprised,' she said, 'to hear you speak so bitterly about the Emperor, especially after his showing you so much goodwill.'

Hari gave a laugh. 'Akbar's goodwill is worth a tunic and a jewelled dagger – but no more.'

He was staring obstinately at the ground as he spoke, and Sita, after studying him for a moment, gave a sigh and went on: 'Surely there is nothing disgraceful in

accepting the leadership of a man like Akbar? Independence bought from Salim would be less honourable.'

To this Hari made no reply, and the next moment the others returned. Altogether, during these days, Hari showed himself off in a decidedly unbecoming light; but his surliness did him no harm with Sita, for she had her own interpretation of it. Indeed, it rather stimulated her sympathies, making her feel at times that Amar as well as Gokal were both living too contentedly inside the closed circle of their pre-occupations. Gokal's interest was of the senses, Amar's of the mind; but there was nothing that either of them wished to give to the world at large – or to receive from it. Day by day it was being borne in upon her that nothing she could say would move Amar by one hairsbreadth, or put off by one single moment the execution of his resolve. In the depths of her heart she found no condemnation of him, nor even reproach, but superficially she often felt aggrieved. Then, too, there was always some sadness for her in the thought that the goal towards which his face was turned lay so remote from hers. His projected separation from her in this world pained her perhaps not more than his refusal to hope for their reunion in another world. It argued, if not a weakness in his love, a complete absence of faith in the determining power of love.

Gokal's description of the manner in which she had accepted the news of his resolve had filled Amar with admiration and gratitude, and he had done what he could to show her what his feelings were. They did not really misunderstand one another; it was not his

fault nor hers that a rift opened between them. The rift was narrow as yet; there were still moments when they could walk along side by side and pretend that it was not there. Nevertheless, it went deep, so deep that they now preferred not even to think about it. They felt a constraint in each other's company and the surface of their intercourse was ruffled by many flaws.

All this time Sita was keeping Hari under distant but keen observation; and one day she said: 'Hari appears to be recovering from his infatuation. I dare say his unhappiness has been a blessing; in the end, perhaps, his thoughts will turn to God.'

Amar smiled rather sceptically before replying, but all he returned was: 'For the whole of his life he has been restless and dissatisfied. I take that as a sign that he is possessed by a longing for the Truth.'

Whereupon Sita impulsively exclaimed: 'Yes, like Akbar he might well say: "It is Thee I seek from temple to temple."'

'Unfortunately,' rejoined Amar, 'he has sometimes wearied of temples and sought consolation in the harems of his acquaintances instead.'

As a matter of fact, Sita's conjectures about Hari were a little premature. His feelings were still embittered and all the world was his enemy. On the other hand, the solitude that he had sought at first was ceasing to be agreeable to him; hours came when he had a longing for human companionship.

From Gokal's garden one could look down through the trees on to a little lawn on the other side of the stream. Here Sita used often to spend an hour with her book, and there were times when the gleam of her dress would fasten insistently upon his attention. It

took him several days to make up his mind, but one fine morning he jumped up, resolved at last to join her. After all, nothing peculiar could be found in such a proceeding; and if his presence was unwelcome he would surely manage to detect it.

His path down the slope passed under tall rhododendrons that shut out all the view, and, three minutes later, when he came to the moss-grown bridge over the stream, he was disappointed at finding that Sita was no longer there. He went across, however, and sat himself down and began reading a little volume of Persian verse which he found lying upon the grass. He was still reading when Sita reappeared. She looked surprised, but her smile was not unwelcoming, and presently they were discussing the Persian poets together.

When that topic came to an end there was a pause, but the murmur of the stream below and the rustle of the trees overhead gave the silence a peaceful quality. Then she picked up the book and fell to reading her favourite passages aloud, while Hari, outstretched on the warm turf, listened at first absent-mindedly, but later with deep pleasure. After this there came another and a longer silence, and then suddenly he said:

‘I wish you could teach me to feel as you do.’

‘How do I feel?’ she asked, surprised.

‘I imagine that you feel all the time as though you were living in a fairy tale.’

‘That’s strange!’ She looked up at the sky. ‘You’re right. I’ve always felt that I was part of a fairy tale.’

He gave a short laugh. ‘You haven’t changed much, then, since you were a child.’

'I've certainly never wanted to,' she replied rather hesitatingly. 'But one does change.' And she sighed.

He raised his head to look at her. 'I don't think *you* have – not much. Neither outwardly nor inwardly.'

'Why do you speak in that bitter tone?' she asked.

'Because I am bitter.'

She didn't want to ask him why, so all she said was: 'I'm sorry.'

For the first time that day embarrassment threatened to fall upon them. He lay staring down into the miniature forest of grass; her pensive eyes rested upon his bare head. The shape of it was pleasant to her and she said at last; 'I have my moods, too. I feel sometimes that a comet coming to destroy the earth would be a kindly thing; that life is neither tragedy nor comedy, but only a farce – so confused, so self-contradictory, so transient are we. But I don't stay in that mood for long.'

'Just now,' she went on after a pause, 'I feel rather empty of thought. I don't know why – I am content to sit here every day doing nothing.'

'You have that book of poetry,' he observed.

'Yes. But I haven't been reading it much. I listen to that stream which reminds me of a stream at home.'

Hari made no reply; he abstained even from looking at her. She certainly was a charming creature, and he waited, smiling, for her to go on. But the silence continued, so presently he said:

'You seem to inhabit a world of your own vision and making. Don't you sometimes find the prosaic worlds of other people imposing themselves upon you?'

'I did at Agra; but I don't here, and I don't at home. For my friends I can always find a place in my own

world – the world which I believe in – the world which you think childish.’

‘No,’ he returned wearily, ‘not childish, only – unreal.’

‘Why unreal? Look at that butterfly over there.’ And her eyes wandered around her. ‘Why unreal? My world takes in everything I see here; this forest and all the life inside it. Isn’t this forest as real as Fatehpur-Sikri?’

She broke off, and while she was looking away, he took the opportunity of studying her. Her small head, the lines of her chin and neck – they were enchanting. She certainly was a most flowerlike being. She made him think of a flower nodding and swaying in a summer breeze, and yet that pose of hers was erect, it was almost imperious in its erectness.

‘You are right, no doubt,’ said he at last, ‘and I am wrong. But I was born wrong.’

‘I’m sorry you are depressed,’ she returned, in her rather drawling, rather expressionless voice. ‘You feel, I suppose, that there is no mystery left in anything, that all feeling is stale, that life is an open book which you have read over and over again. And you think that your mood is permanent. Suffering always has, as Feizi says, “the nature of infinity.”’

Very soon after this she got up and wandered away in the direction of the house. Hari did not offer to accompany her, but seated himself upon the ground again; and while he listened to the liquid sounds of the stream and dry rustle of the breeze, the memory of her parting smile lingered pleasantly in his mind. A peace that he had not felt for many months descended upon him, and the scene before his eyes did more than

merely soothe. It instilled into him the conviction that it possessed a value of its own, and in its value, thus deeply felt, there dwelt a power of comfort. For its value was secure and enduring, whilst the value of his own personal happiness – well, that was small at the best. How fortunate, then, that it was open to a man to rejoice in what lay outside himself.

For an hour or more he stayed there; but when he began to reflect upon the problem of conduct he was thrown into perplexity again. What guidance did such feelings and intuitions afford? In what direction did they point? He pondered, but to this question nature made no reply.



By some unaccountable turn Hari's spirits the next day were lower than before. It was not so much that his heart ached for Lalita as that his whole being, he felt, was accursed. With appalling clearness he saw a dreadful truth: in addition to the will to live a man needs must have the power to enjoy life. Of these two gifts the second seemed to him the more mysterious, and his loss of it filled him with dismay. Thinking of Sita, he determined to make her bear the brunt of his depression. Her happiness worked upon him like a challenge, calling him to put it to the proof. From the earliest dawn he strove to give shape to the formless pessimism within him, hunting for ideas that would embody it, for words that would drive it sharply into her understanding. Yes, he meant to carry war into her country. Religion, he would say, was nothing more than a refuge – even for those who were not conscious that they stood in need of one. He would tell her that neither courage, nor force of intellect, nor any nameable gift or virtue could be accounted a guarantee against self-deception. Nor could the seeker after truth make any appeal to the authority of wisdom or goodness, for the sceptic of mean character and mean intelligence might – in spite of his meanness or even by virtue of his meanness – interpret the universe more truly than the sage or the saint. There was no evidence that wisdom and goodness had a universal

instead of a merely terrestrial significance, and to be satisfied with the latter humanity must be smug, indeed, in its own invented virtue. The plain man had a plain need for some sort of religion, if only as an excuse for behaving decently; as a reason to give himself, for instance, for not breaking the head of the prig, who got on very well (or so at least he would flatter himself) by the light of his own sweet nature. To sum up, a religion was what every honest man wanted and could not, for his very honesty, find.

Sita, of course, was a Christian; she retained very elementary ideas – ideas that had all the charm and *naïveté* of the nursery clinging to them. There was a kind Father in Heaven whose function it was to deal out justice tempered with mercy. There was a system of rewards and punishments, everything, in fact, after the pattern of an earthly schoolroom.

Well prepared was Hari at the time of his setting out; but, again, when he got to the little lawn, it was to find no one there. The morning, however, was still young, so he decided to sit down and wait. This time the air was still, the sky pale, but without a cloud; a scent rose from the warm pine needles, and now and then he would catch a breath of fragrance from the moon-flowers in the long grass behind. Those silvery blooms were already wide open and although they faded in the course of a single day there were always others to take their place. Hosts of butterflies hovered over them and when he became tired of watching these a family of water-rats popped out upon the bank. So amusing was the play of the young ones that, for several minutes after Sita had appeared, he and she remained hushed, intent upon not disturbing the game.

This over, it took him a little time to get back into the right vein, but he succeeded in the end and came out with most of his prearranged say. Nor was it ineffective. He had the satisfaction of seeing a troubled look spread over Sita's face. 'So what I say is this,' he concluded, driving his last points home: 'Your faith, like your happiness, is simply the expression of a temperament. My temperament is, unfortunately, not hospitable to the delusions of religion. But until quite lately I did manage to bring a certain zest to the business of living. I must recover that zest or give up the game.'

'I don't think your zest actually made you very happy,' replied Sita distressfully.

'It was better than nothing,' said Hari.

'But it had no stability – as you discovered to your cost. Your business now, surely, is to look, not for happiness, but for something deeper out of which happiness will spring.'

Hari gave a shrug. 'Christianity, I suppose!'

Looking into the distance Sita smiled to herself. 'You might do worse.'

'I am very well aware that I could not possibly do better,' returned Hari. '*Your* Christianity, at any rate, is charming.'

'Only you are not, like me, still in the nursery!'

Hari raised himself upon one elbow to contemplate her. Really, it was impossible, whilst lying upon this sweet-smelling grass and talking to someone as pretty as she, to do justice to the blackness of the universe or one's own innermost gloom. But he was not alone in his failure to carry out his full intentions. Sita was missing her aim too. She couldn't find the moment for

producing all the serious and compelling things that she had come prepared with. Perhaps homilies would flow from her lips more naturally some other day. At any rate, on this particular morning, the conversation, initiated with solemnity, took its own wilful course, grew lighter and lighter, and no attempt was made to alter it.

The next day, too, much the same thing happened, and the next, and the next. So, after a while, both she and Hari gave the matter up. The way in which they were passing their time seemed, after all, to be justified in its results. Hari found himself recovering his spirits, and Sita could give herself the credit of bringing this about. Had anyone suggested to them that this was the beginning of a gallantry, they both would have smilingly shaken their heads. It was only by slow degrees that Hari became aware that sentiment was colouring his relationship, and Sita, when this change was no longer to be ignored, slipped into the assumption that his feelings, whatever depths they might reach, would remain without danger for either of them.

Upon this pleasant footing their intimacy grew apace. Although Sita had no taste for vapid flirtation, life without romance was, to her thinking, hardly life at all. She accepted Hari's homage serenely; indeed, it was her very serenity that at last made him restive, so that one day he said: 'Are you never afraid of my getting to love you too well?'

She gave him a mocking glance. 'Can you pass from one love to another as quickly as that?'

'Perhaps!'

Again her glance brushed over him, but she also

shook her head, and for the time the subject was not pursued. A few day later, however, when she was talking about her return home, the indifference with which she seemed to envisage their parting stung him once more into speech. 'You have grown so accustomed to my adoration,' he said, 'don't you think you may miss it a little when we part?'

Her answer was made quite lightly. 'My dear Hari, I shall miss you very much.'

'I was not suggesting that. I said you would miss being made love to.'

'Now why,' she questioned in a voice completely changed, 'why do you go out of your way . . .?'

He shrugged. 'Let us look the truth in the face. I have been making love to you.'

'No, no!' she cried.

They were standing beside the little bridge when this was said, for their hour had just run out. A few deep moments of indecision passed over them. They were looking at one another intently. And then Sita turned and took the path up to her house.

On his way home Hari stepped out with a vigour that corresponded to an unwonted stir within. 'What do I mean by this?' he questioned. 'Am I behaving heedlessly? Do I threaten to draw a veil of cheapness over these days?' As his troubled memory touched here and there upon the hours they had shared together, one scene in particular reached forward reproachfully into the present. They were wandering along by the stream and the air was full of a white mist that curled up from the wet ground. Every leaf, every twig, every blade, had a bead of water hanging to it; and things close at hand seemed particularly vivid because every-

thing beyond was blotted out by the soft whiteness. They had stopped before a little bank that was crowded with wild flowers. Each flower looked up at them with a colour and outline so definite that they felt as if they were children looking at flowers for the first time. How sharp was the sensation – now revived – of standing there, on that little island in the mist, in the presence – so intense – of those archetypal flowers! Was he unregardful of the value of shared moments such as those? Unmindful of their beauty – or of the fineness of restraint? No, no; he must tell her quickly that it was not so.

And yet, although these intentions held, at their next meeting, when he tried to carry them out, he was completely baffled, and not a thing took place in the way he had arranged. They came together, he and she, in all the tension of long and anxious heart-searchings – a tension cloaked under a delusive calm. And then, before they knew it, the words they were exchanging were full of a deep agitation; the event carried them away on its own rush; and what he finally said to her was: ‘You have known for some time that I love you. Nevertheless, everything shall be as you wish. Only tell me what you do wish! Tell me how much I may love you; and I will try. . . .’

She clasped her hands together in the extremity of her disquiet. ‘You must love me only as you love those flowers, or as a child,’ she said, ‘or as a creature of your own imagination; but not – not as a woman, not as a person belonging to the real world.’

After this everything went on – or seemed to go on –

as before. Sita was apparently determined not to acknowledge any change, and Hari lent himself to the pretence. Nevertheless, his words had recoiled upon him. The question how much their dalliance meant could be ignored (he now felt it all the time) only as long as it had been left unasked. Their loves, while content in the Eden that she had created for them, had been innocent and safe. Why, then, had he stirred up temptation? And why now, just because she showed herself willing to continue on the same footing as before – why was he perpetually haunted by a little laugh of cynical amusement which seemed to be ringing in the air? Why, in spite of his contrition, did he still feel himself spurred on, instigated, assured by some demon within, that he was now free to make love to her with far greater directness than before?

He resisted the enticement; but a good deal of the pleasure that he had formerly taken in her company was lost in the struggle and constraint. Nor was he able any longer to be forgetful of the figure of Amar. Before many days had passed he was saying to himself with groans that there was nothing for it but to go away. He had taken his lesson recently enough; and this time – no, no! there should be no indecision.

A few days more and chance threw him a suggestion which he caught at with a miserable alacrity. He happened to be in the house when an urgent summons came for Amar, whose parents, an aged couple, were spending the hot season on a little country estate of theirs three days' journey westward along the hills. Amar's mother had been taken ill, and was very

desirous of seeing her son before she died. On this Amar announced that he would set out the next morning at daybreak; and Hari, giving himself no time for second thoughts, at once made the offer to accompany him.



It was raining, but not hard. A thin, fine moisture drifted through the trees, the clouds were lying low upon the hills. All night it had rained; the hoofs of the horses sank noiselessly into the sodden leaves, and the heavy boughs above sagged as though from a weight of despondent thought. To Hari, riding along in silence, Nature herself seemed to have veiled her head in melancholy; but he was not insensible to the beauty of this her mourning aspect. There was grandeur in the valley depths lost in a clinging mist and in the darkly-wooded mountain-flanks going up into cloud.

With thoughts of Sita pressing incessantly upon his mind, he strove hard to convince himself that she would understand and approve his going away. The worst part of it was that moments came when he himself lost all sense of the rightness of the impulse under which he had acted, and then too he had transports of angry rebelliousness, when he was conscious only of having given his heart a sudden and very painful wrench. Some of his anger visited itself upon Amar, who, going along in front, tall, straight-backed, but with chin sunk upon his breast, presented a figure of the most profound contemplation. It was impossible to believe that his inward serenity was not flawless. But had any man the right to be so unaware of the feelings of those near him? How much thought had he bestowed upon Sita during these last weeks? Was she not, after all, a

woman – and his wife? And could a man withdraw himself from everyday life without suffering the loss of his earthly rights? ‘You,’ cried Hari in his heart, ‘you, who stand in my path, are not a man of flesh and blood but an abstraction. That is what your lofty ideals have made of you. The virtuous man is separated from the rest of mankind by the pedestal of his own virtue; he becomes a stumbling-block – or a figure of absurdity. However,’ he went on to himself, ‘I do not condemn Amar’s wish to retire from the world, for even if he were to remain in it in order to serve, he would still be far estranged from the human. But then again: how can a man, enclosing himself in the solitude of his own self-conscious will, win freedom from the differentiation of personality? Yet that, precisely, is what Amar is aiming at. Is he not following a road that will carry him further and further into the inward maze and tighten the knot of selfhood? And I? Why am I following him?’ Once more he lost himself, and then his thoughts came out into the light again: ‘What I behold as weak and incomplete in myself, what I am now inclined to flee from as from a painful disturbance, or as a sin – can that not be interpreted in a dual way corresponding to its own ambiguous nature? Why is life regarded as either a heaven or a hell? Certainly not because it stands midway between. No, life is both the height and the depth; and filth and cruelty are also joy and strength.’

The ride went on, and always in the same unbroken silence. The trees under which they were now passing were taller and also more widely spaced. After a while Hari spurred his horse forward and rode along by Amar’s side; but the latter, still deep in meditation,

gave no sign of noticing his presence. Hari studied him with sidelong glances, his face wearing a faint smile; and presently, in a voice devoid of all expression, he inquired of Amar whether his religious exercises had been progressing favourably; was he yet within sight of his goal? To bring his mind down to earth cost Amar, clearly, some effort; before replying he fastened upon Hari eyes that were still focused upon thoughts lying far beyond. His answer, however, when it came, was definite enough and delivered with perfect simplicity. Moreover, having once begun to speak, he went on with a freedom from reserve for which Hari was unprepared. Without doubt it was the forest and the grandeur of the forest that wrought upon him. Thoughts that could not have been expressed without a kind of spiritual impropriety in the noise and bustle of the world rose naturally to the lips in a place such as this. Gravely he explained that he had reached a stage on life's journey when worldly things could interest him no longer. But, far from sinking into any tranquillity of indifference, he had been overtaken by a terrible sense of urgency. One half of his life had passed already, and how little he had lessened his distance from his goal! His recent practices in meditation had not been discouraging, but they had shown him that the time for casting off all mundane attachments had arrived. It was necessary that he should enter a monastery.

His gaze had been going straight out before him as he spoke; and Hari, who was looking into his face with concentration, now gave a sudden frown and turned away. As they advanced at a walk under the hush of the wet, windless trees, his thoughts rushed into the

distant future. He saw Amar as an old man, sitting under the palm trees of a monastery garden in Ceylon. He saw him in saffron robes, with lined face and shaven head. And then, the next instant, he was seized with an intense awareness of the actual present – the fresh, damp scent of this Himalayan wilderness, and the austere presence of the solitary human being at his side. Then again, all at once he travelled in imagination back to the house where Sita, standing by the window with vacant eyes, was pursuing a vision of two travellers upon their way. Into her personality he projected himself with an effect that was like walking into the sunlight out of a sepulchre; and upon his thought of her he lingered until it came to him with a start that he had not yet spoken a word in response to his companion.

‘And Sita?’ he questioned briefly.

The expression that gathered upon Amar’s face was not easily to be interpreted, but there was nothing evasive in his reply. Hari was shown that carefully, conscientiously, everything had been thought out, and every provision made. As he listened, the shadow over his face deepened. Here was a remarkable lesson in the art for which he himself was so signally inapt. He was shown how the wayward vine of this our earthly life, could be gently, cunningly, bent to the framework of circumstance, and the spirit, thus acquitted of its mundane charge, be allowed the freedom to soar.

As he considered Amar, envy, admiration, scorn, and curiosity competed in his breast. Currents of sympathy and hostility pulsed through him, quickening the beat of his heart. All at once, and before he rightly knew what he was about, he drew up, and grasping the reins

of Amar's horse, brought it to a standstill with his own. Leaning forward in the saddle, he plunged his gaze deep into Amar's eyes, and thus, for at least a minute, held him under a fixed and stern regard. Then, by a curious transformation, that lowering look turned into a smile. The smile said nothing, or rather defied Amar to find a meaning for it.

To this strange piece of behaviour the Rajah submitted without any loss of calm. There was no change in his composure; Hari's aggressiveness, if such it was, missed its stroke; his challenge, if it was one, fell to the ground. After another moment he withdrew his hand, and with that the two horses went forward and the ride continued as before.

For the rest of that day, and for the better part of the next, their way lay deep through the same tall ranks of dark-hued, windless trees. The forest was grand and still; not even a bird's note sounded; only at times the sun, breaking through the clouds, shone mistily overhead. For Hari the monotonous hours passed as in a dream. The activities of the world, made to appear at once turbulent and trivial, seemed to be receding beyond hail of memory itself. Like the crash and roar of the waves, as one journeys inland from the sea, they were growing faint, they were now completely unheard. To this sense of isolation he submitted himself; nor was he ungrateful for the numbness that crept over him.

In the afternoon of the second day their ride took them out from under the trees and along the edge of a grassy plateau high up above the great plain. Distance obscured all detail; the eye swept across a limitless expanse over which hung a ceiling of grey cloud. Here

and there a bank of storm-rain drifted slowly along, filling the space between earth and sky with a dull purple blur. Even at this elevation the air was hot, damp, and lifeless; the horses moved sluggishly and their riders had no energy to press them on. Hari's thoughts went back to a recluse, beneath whose cave-dwelling they had passed only a few hours ago. Whilst the multitude of human beings swarming invisibly upon the plain offered him, in their close, common life, the likeness of a mildew upon the face of the earth, that hermit stood forth, in his imagination, as a separate and self-subsistent unit. He stood forth, as Hari was pleased to picture him, as an independent centre of spiritual life; and that, no doubt, was because he had taken to himself the space for a true individuality to move in. Yet that same principle of individuality was, in Amar's view, delusive; pain and evil were inherent in it, and thus one arrived at the kernel of Buddha's doctrine: wisdom and self-knowledge and self-extinction were one. More than once during that day did Hari feel inclined to retrace his steps to the cave and petition to be received as a disciple. But he had been told that the hermit was a Sakti; and that branch of Hinduism was not the one to which he was now inclined. Hinduism in general, however, appealed to him as the broadest and most elastic of all religious systems. He was attracted by its independence of dogma, the smallness of its demands upon blind faith. But these attractions also constituted its weakness, lending point to the criticism made by Amar that Hinduism was not a religion but simply religiousness itself. Upon the spiritual substance it imposed no form, to the urge it gave no certain direction; and although among the

uneducated it borrowed shape from the myths, superstitions, and customs, with which the common mind was already richly stocked, in an unencumbered intelligence it remained fluid and colourless, as rarefied, indeed, as any brain-spun metaphysics.

While he was thus meditating they came to another turn of the road that was to take them down from the plateau. At the bottom of the slope there spread a broad valley containing patches of open ground, and as their eyes wandered over it an encampment came into view. After they had moved on a little a closer scrutiny of the clustered tents showed that they belonged to some person of importance, but neither Hari nor Amar was prepared for the information given them upon riding up; they were told that the distinguished traveller was none other than Shaik Mobarek. At this news they exchanged glances; the encounter was not greatly to the liking of either of them, and they shared the sudden idea that perhaps it was not too late to push on. But while they were still halting in hesitation, the curtain before one of the tents was swept aside and Mobarek himself stepped out. Upon seeing them the old man had a movement of surprise, which, however, he was quick to transform into a gesture of welcome. The choice was thus taken out of their hands and a few moments later they found themselves seated as honoured guests in the principal marquee. It was a change abrupt enough to be somewhat disconcerting. While Mobarek was playing his part as host with all the manners of an accomplished worldling, Amar was more than a little stiff, and Hari felt hard put to it to keep up an appearance at all. His acquaintance with Mobarek did not go far, nor did he have any inclination

to extend it. This little old mystic with his observant eyes, confident manners, and nimble tongue, certainly knew how to make the best of both worlds – and at this time Hari was feeling very little at home in either. Mobarek's gay, quick talk only confused him; he remained more or less in the clouds until a sentence came out that brought him down with a painful jerk. Mobarek had been telling them that he was on his way down from a visit to Prince Daniyal, who was passing the season in the uplands. 'And the charming Princess was there too,' he went on. 'We all spent the happiest fortnight together, and now I am escorting her down to her parents who are attending His Majesty on his way northward to Lahore. Yes, the dear child is with me now; she will be coming in presently. The wedding, I believe, is to take place in about three months' time.'

For the next few minutes Hari's nerves were stretched to the limit of his endurance – a condition which he hoped that Mobarek would not observe, or that he would be unable, at any rate, to account for. It was appalling, this idea that Lalita and he might, at any moment, find themselves face to face under Mobarek's inquisitive gaze. Unable to bear the strain he got up at last and left the tent, his excuse being that he liked to superintend the foddering of his horse himself.

Outside he looked about him, desperately undecided what to do. Two rows of tents stretched down the level turf, and behind them on the left rose a dark wall of young firs. He tried to think, but his brain refused its office; with the level evening sunlight pouring into his eyes, he could only blink and peer resourcelessly down the two lines of gleaming tents. Beyond them, not far



distant, was the place where the horses were picketed; some grooms were moving about amongst them; but, by some odd chance, there was no one else about; no one handy to send with a message. . . .

Lalita – it confounded him to think of it – she must be somewhere within a dozen yards of where he stood. She might emerge, he supposed, at any moment. Would she be discomposed, would she think he was pursuing her, would she be angry – or glad? As his imagination got under way a new and not unpleasurable excitement flowed through him. Lalita's image, which had grown dim of late, glowed forth again with all the colours of life. That golden skin! That tawny hair of hers! Those strong young limbs whose turn and movement he had known – he still knew – so well! And then again he quailed; his spirit shrank away. No; he was not ready for this exigency. It was too much.

He had gone forward some thirty yards, and now once more he halted. What he needed was the time to recover self-possession and make up a plan of behaviour. His eyes turned to the compact thicket of young firs within such easy reach. Why not – for a brief space – just disappear?

This impulse wheeled him suddenly round into a narrow passage between two of the nearest tents, and at the back of them, before making his dive into the wood, he swept a furtive glance right and left. Five steps more and he would have vanished; but there, in the shadow of the left-hand tent, waiting for him, yes, evidently waiting and expecting – was Lalita herself. What shining eyes, what flushed cheeks! Oh, didn't he know that sparkle and that glow! And she caught hold

of him: 'Couldn't you hear me? Couldn't you hear me? I was calling you, calling . . . I - ' He seized her in his arms. The world disappeared behind the flare of his delight. But it was a madness of two or three seconds only. With unnecessary violence they flung themselves apart; Lalita had gone - disappeared, he imagined, into her tent; and when he came to himself again he was alone - far, far away it seemed from any human stir, deep in the silence and semi-darkness of the fir wood.

LESS than two hours later Hari was seated at Mobarek's table with Lalita upon his right and Amar opposite. Lalita had perfect composure and chatted to Amar with a right measure of vivacity, while Mobarek, although full of attentions for his guests, was prodigal of paternal smiles and sallies in her regard. During the first part of the evening the only person to show signs of preoccupation was Amar, but later he took up his share in the talk, and as time went on Hari became the silent member of the party.

His hour in the wood had seen him through the crisis of his excitement. In that hour he had given himself a loose rein; he had rolled on the ground, shouted his laughter at the skies, shaken his fist at all the four corners of the world. He and Lalita were rebels, they snapped their fingers at circumstance, they defied the powers that be. If they chose they would run away together that very night. Lalita would have no fear; she was ready. Or, if other considerations came in, they would let the spin of a coin decide.

Since then his excitement had died down, but his attitude remained unchanged. Through the long evening hours he made Lalita his study; he could see that, like him, she had learnt more than a little since the miserable day of their parting; but he retained his conviction that he had read her temper aright. It was interesting, it was even a little pathetic, to mark how

she had come under the discipline of the world and how its lessons, whether for good or ill, had sunk into her. Noteworthy was her grasp of present requirements and her confidence in her rôle. She had to present the picture of a happy, self-confident young woman, capable of assuming with ease the brilliant social position that her approaching marriage offered. To this end she had been training herself, and perhaps it even amused her to display before him her newly-acquired skill. Fluency in gossip, distinguished intimacies, familiarity with what was fashionable in art, music, and literature – all these she was showing off. But it gave Hari a pang to see her adopting the affectations, the catchwords, the sophisticated inanities, of Prince Daniyal's particular coterie; and still less easy to accept was her pretence that a genuine affection subsisted between Daniyal and herself. It was only a pretence – of that he felt sure – although no doubt she had often hoped that it was going to deceive her too. No doubt she had been making the best she could of her accepted lover. But true worldliness she would never achieve; her character contained both more and less than the necessary ingredients.

Thus the evening wore on until she rose to withdraw. First, she bent her head to Mobarek to receive upon her forehead a benedictory kiss, then she gave her hand to Hari with a formal smile; last, she turned to Amar, and in saying good night reminded him that – if he was really making such an early start next morning – it was also good-bye. It had all seemed very simple, but in truth it was not so. A message had passed in her pressure of Hari's hand; fever had again been injected into his veins. Quickly renewing his con-

versation with Mobarek, he tried to recover his calm; but his heart was beating out that it was certain – yes, yes, it was certain – that Lalita would be ready to receive him in her tent that night.

Not long after her departure he pleaded fatigue and withdrew. The night was fresh and the sky bright with moonlight, although the moon herself was still hidden behind the mountains in the east. He stood listening to the stillness; the only sound in all the valley seemed to be the lively accents of Mobarek's voice inside the tent. As he walked slowly down the row it struck him that he still was uncertain which was Lalita's. One of them, however, was lit from inside by a faint rosy glow and he marked its position with care.

Sitting at the entrance of his own tent he looked up again into the blue-black sky and presently his eyes fell upon a vision that caught his breath and rapt him out of himself. Hung unimaginably high in the dome of heaven there gleamed a frosted slope, a snow-field which the moon had turned to silver. He gazed at it until his wonder melted into an inexplicable longing and his longing into a biting sadness.

With a shiver he got up at last, but just as he was about to retire into his tent he observed a tall figure approaching over the grass and recognized Amar. As Amar drew nearer it seemed to him that there was something purposeful in his gait; a reluctance, too, in the slowness with which he stalked forward. He waited until Amar stood before him, and then – interpreting the other's silence in his own fashion – he invited him with a gesture into the tent. Inside, a small light was burning; Amar sat down at the little table and he

himself sat down opposite. It was some moments before either of them spoke.

‘What I have to tell you is that I saw . . .’ And Amar knitted his brows. ‘Good God!’ he added with unaccustomed vehemence. ‘What kind of madness possessed you?’

Hari was silent.

‘Mobarek and I came out of the tent two minutes after you left. We were actually following you, and hardly more than a dozen yards behind.’

‘Did Mobarek see?’

‘No. He had stopped for a moment to look into the Princess’s tent.’

‘Lucky!’ said Hari drily.

Amar, still frowning, continued to study him. ‘I have no wish to interfere in your affairs. . . . That you will surely understand. But all the same. . . .’ He made a pause. He was waiting; but Hari waited, too, and thus they eyed one another.

At last Hari gave a shrug and a smile. ‘After all – we make our start at daybreak to-morrow. And that being so . . .’

Amar ignored this; his eyes remained fixed upon Hari’s face. There was meaning in that look, and now Hari was the one to frown. A flush, too, rose to his cheeks, nor was it difficult to see that anger caused it.

‘Well?’ he challenged.

Amar stirred and muttered in the extremity of his annoyance. ‘Heaven knows,’ he said again, ‘I have no wish to mix in your affairs, but it is obvious that Princess Lalita and you are already intimate. In fact, by putting two and two together, I think I can . . .’

He broke off. 'Is it necessary for me to go on? All that I require of you now is an assurance . . .'

'Of what?'

'That you will commit no follies to-night.'

Hari threw back his head and gave an angry laugh.

'You consider me intrusive, perhaps?' And Amar's tone was frigid with distaste. 'All the same I must go through with what I conceive to be my duty. The happiness – the lives, possibly – of many people are at stake.'

'Very well!' And suddenly leaning forward, Hari drummed with his fingers upon the table. 'Very well! Let us thrash this matter out!'

Amar drew back with something like dismay. 'Is a discussion really necessary? Surely your good sense. . . .'

'No!' said Hari. 'And to tell you the truth I have no good sense at my disposition – at any rate, not to-night.'

Amar was silent; and looking straight into his eyes, Hari went on: 'I am tired of expediency. Do you understand?'

'Expediency?' Amar gave a weary sigh.

'I see no reason why I should respect other people's petty conveniences. I have never much regarded my own.'

There was no reply.

'Lalita feels as I do.' Hari laughed and snapped his fingers. 'She is ready. Very well!'

At this, with a muffled exclamation, Amar threw himself back in his seat. The light of anger shone in his eyes and he said: 'You may treat yourself as you please, but common decency forbids that you should risk –'

'Oh, I know what you mean, my dear Amar!'

Hari's eyes had now caught the spark. 'You mean that I ought to bear in mind that you have been busily currying favour with Lalita's father – and that the person responsible for bringing you two together was Ambissa – and that the whole trend of your policy is towards Daniyal. You want me to bear in mind that your future relationship with Daniyal might be prejudiced if it were to happen that I, your brother-in-law, whilst in your company, made off with his betrothed.'

Amar, visibly, had to struggle to control himself. 'These taunts are undeserved. But I am not here to defend myself. If you choose to think that I am actuated merely by self interest, you may do so. I shall be satisfied if I succeed in dissuading you –'

Hari was not listening. A singular agitation had taken possession of him and he interrupted with violence.

'Amar! Have you the cynicism to approve of that girl's marriage to Daniyal? And are you going to have the cynicism to attach yourself to Daniyal's party? Answer me plainly, for worldliness should have the courage of its convictions.'

'You are mixing up things that do not belong together.' And Amar stiffened. 'The choice between Salim and Daniyal is a political one. I am not interested in Daniyal's private affairs. What business have *you* to concern yourself with them? And as for the kind of interference you appear to be contemplating now. . . .'

'What about love?'

'I see, you are smiling,' replied Amar, 'and your smile answers you.'

Hari shook his head. 'No. Nor do you understand.' He got up and poured himself out some water. 'I have



come to such a pass that I cannot measure my feelings at all.'

These words were followed by silence. Amar was scrutinizing him in some surprise; Hari was in the grip of an emotion, the nature of which was obscure to him.

'Listen!' Hari went on with a kind of sombre impetuosity, 'your mind is too reasonable for me, and believing, as I do, that reason itself is delusive, I prefer to take my delusions from nearer to their source. Since man needs must be mad, I prefer to be mad in a simpler, easier way. I will tell you why you don't believe in a God, Amar. Your reason tells you that if there is a God He must certainly stand outside reason Himself. To begin with, no God, sane after your pattern, would have constructed a world on such lines as this. Look about you! What is there in nature that your reason can understand or approve? The rising sap in the trees, the unfolding of flowers, the swarming of bees, the mating of beasts, everywhere birth and death with a little interval of wantonness and waste in between. All this you condemn, and perhaps rightly. But what if I prefer to let my life flow as unreasoning Nature wills?'

A thoughtful look had come into Amar's face and his eyes were now bent upon the ground.

'I think I begin to understand you better,' he pronounced after an interval.

'Do you?' Hari shot a sidelong glance at him. 'What do you understand?'

'This: the world presents itself to you as alien and even antagonistic, and you intend your acts to be acts of rebellion. But that attitude is vain. Could you, but for one moment, see yourself and the world in their

true relation, you would be ashamed at your absurdity. You would see that you are separated from the whole by delusions only – the delusions clustering about the Self. Ah! then you would see that liberty is not the liberty to rebel, and you would cease to be a child who beats at the stone over which it has just stumbled.’

Hari smiled as he made his reply. ‘No; my rebelliousness is less simple than that. You see, I am without your absolute confidence in a particular scheme of values. You are a good Buddhist; and life, you hold, must of necessity be uneasiness, distressfulness, vanity, and vexation of spirit. Perhaps I agree so far; but with you it follows that life as a whole is an evil which might well be brought to an end. With that I disagree. Life stretches illimitably before us as well as behind us, and we possess no standards by which to judge its worth. Not in terms of reasonableness, or of happiness, or of any accepted good, can it be judged. Life, taking it in the large, gives us one hint only – I should say, only one single command: Live!’

Amar looked at him searchingly. ‘I am no hedonist. But I respect wisdom, and if wisdom brings happiness in its train, I see no reason to reject it. There is no glory in continuing to flounder through the miseries of sensuality, ill-will, and ignorance.’

He paused; for a space the two men considered one another; then Hari said:

‘I think it is you who are the rebel, Amar; and a more desperate one than I, for what you are rebelling against in yourself is more powerful than either reason or morality.’

Having spoken these words, Hari moved to the tent entrance and stood looking out into the night. As

Amar considered the outline of his head and shoulders, his earlier fears melted away. The atmosphere had strangely altered since the beginning of their colloquy. He heard the intake of Hari's deep breaths and saw him shiver from the chill of the air; then Hari returned and threw himself down upon his seat.

'Well?' He smiled wanly. 'And what do you say now?'

Amar was silent.

'You have gained your point. I suppose that is enough?'

'You have decided well,' murmured Amar.

'The spirit rises in one, and the spirit dies down. . . .' His regard had become ironical; and after a minute he went on: 'But what of her? Has it died down in her too?'

'You have given her up once before,' said Amar. 'This – all this – has been her doing. And it is sheer folly.'

Hari eyed him with a certain curiosity. 'Are you actually – a little bitter against her?'

'Bitter? No, no!'

'My friend,' said Hari in a tone of rather dreary raillery, 'I am not sure that in one branch of self-knowledge at least I have not out-distanced you. You have made no terms with the feminine in yourself, and of that we all partake. Some day it may wreak vengeance upon you.'

Amar smiled enigmatically. 'The feminine has its own path – but to the same goal. Women, too, have their special gift – which I leave to them.'

'I envy you your certainties.'

'There is one which, by itself, is enough.'

'And that?'

Amar had risen from his seat. 'Above all doubts there rises our intuition of the moral law. Nor have you forgotten it, Karma, the noblest intuition of our race.'

Hari made no reply. After waiting a moment Amar went slowly outside, and together they stood looking up into the vault of the night.

'I know,' said Hari in an undertone, 'I know that the sun will rise in the east; would to God I felt equally certain that evil bore with it its inevitable expiation.'

'It does.'

These words fell with a heavy stroke, but Hari's face did not change.

'Know this,' continued Amar, 'there is a distinction between causation in dead matter, causation in the organic world, and causation in the animate world, where the operation of moral law is superimposed upon the natural. This is Karma; it is the chief force in the universe inasmuch as it controls life's gradual progress towards final deliverance.'

Hari, whose eyes had been lifted to the night-sky, now fixed them once again upon his companion.

'You must tell me more about these things,' he muttered after a pause

Amar inclined his head.

'Thoughts like those came to me in the forest,' said Hari slowly. 'But there were others, too.'

THE valley was full of mist when Hari and Amar set out in the dawning of the next day. A pale, unfriendly light filtered down from overhead; the damp air seemed to blow chillingly against them as they breasted it, and yet there was no stir in the endless ranks of tall, dark trees, and the mist coiled and uncoiled after its own lazy will. In the course of the morning they travelled up into a mild sunlight; the afternoon found them ranging along the shoulder of a hill; and before the sun had sunk far they were able to look down into the little valley of Ravi which was their destination. Amar could now point to the grey shingle roof of his father's house. It had been built on a small spur running out into the flat valley-bed, which was nearly all occupied by a shallow lake. The lake was fringed with willows and other water-loving trees; large stretches of it were covered with what looked like rushes and water-lilies; and flocks of birds kept rising and settling upon its surface. A cloudy sky hung above, but now and then a few watery beams would stray along the valley, silvering the water and lighting up the silvery green of the willows.

In this scene there was one feature that arrested Amar's attention, a group of gaily decorated tents close to his father's house. As he looked at them it dawned upon him that the encampment must be Prince Daniyal's; and, although Mobarek had prepared

him for the Prince's presence somewhere in the neighbourhood, it was a surprise to find him so near as this. Why had Daniyal not pitched his camp upon the usual ground on the other side of the lake? The reason did not become apparent until they were half-way down the slope, and then they saw that recent heavy rains had flooded the whole valley, turning the level water-meadows into a wide marsh. But surely, thought Amar, the Prince might have gone to some other place altogether, for it was obviously unfitting that a house where an old lady lay dying should be surrounded by the bustle of a royal encampment.

Upon reaching the house he committed Hari to the care of his father and hastened to his mother's bedside. Rajah Bihar was hardly known to Hari, who remembered him just well enough to perceive how greatly he had aged since their last meeting. A profound pity for the poor old man seized upon him at once, and this sentiment was dominant in his mind during the whole of his stay. For the next few days he had to spend his time almost uninterruptedly in the aged Rajah's company, for a heavy storm which broke out in the night continued without a single break. Day and night the house resounded to the pelt and rattle of the gale, and, although he would gladly have passed the hours tramping about the wet hillsides, he saw himself obliged to sit in the semi-darkness indoors in order not to wound the feelings of his host. The house was an old-fashioned building, picturesque in the fashion of a bygone day, and no doubt pleasant enough in sunny weather, but inexpressibly gloomy when the rain came down like this. Its would-be quaintness and cosiness then revealed themselves as nothing better than ugliness and

dark discomfort. But it was the atmosphere of the house that oppressed Hari most; it breathed a stale breath of decrepitude which seemed to stifle the heart. And then too, alas! at all times and everywhere, hovering feebly and solicitously about him, was the tremulous figure of the old Rajah.

In his youth Rajah Bihar had been dapper and he retained a certain spruceness even now. Every morning he went through the ritual of a careful toilet and presented himself to the world with as soldierly a bearing as he could. His code bade him not only hide his feelings, but pass hurriedly over all his personal concerns. His daily reports on his wife were curt and, as it were, apologetic, giving place quickly to topics of more general interest. To make talk, to keep up appearances, was absolutely essential to his self-respect. Deep as his devotion to the Ranee was, sometimes in the midst of his talk he would actually forget to obey a summons to her bedside. His grief was the grief of the aged; buried under the ash of so many burnt-out years, it had no strength to flame; it smouldered, it smouldered; and how should it do more?

At times, as he was sitting stiffly in his chair opposite, Hari could see the swelling sorrow mount up into his watery old eyes. But then, clearing his throat and smoothing his white moustache with a fine silk handkerchief, he would launch out upon an ocean of common-places, and the sound of his own voice seemed to have a miraculous power to comfort him. The truth was that although able to keep up his self-respect and courage, these were the last qualities that he retained. So empty was his intelligence that Hari could not help hoping that it had never, even at its best, been anything more

than mediocre; and how cynical, in any case, was the work of time; to leave self-respect and courage so naked that they – even they – appeared almost ridiculous. But perhaps – perhaps the old Rajah's stoicism was not so poignant after all. Perhaps it had its roots sunk deep in the knowledge that he could, and in the end he would, welcome Time's ultimate robbery, Life's ultimate consolation, the loss of the power even to suffer.

After the first few days Hari and Amar began to see a little more of one another and in these novel conditions each gradually discovered unsuspected elements in the other's character. Gratitude mingled with Amar's surprise at the surpassing patience shown by Hari towards his father. There was something in this, and in the whole of his present disposition, that the Rajah would have liked to understand better. Why did he prolong his stay in this house of discomfort and sadness? It looked almost as if he were deliberately subjecting himself to a new discipline; and the story came into Amar's mind how Buddha, when in the pride of youth, had gone forth one day and chanced to meet a woman stricken with disease, a man infirm with age, and a corpse. Legend had it that this incident marked a crisis in his spiritual development; and what if it should turn out that these days at Ravi were to make a similar turning point in Hari's career? In their talks together Hari showed that one side of his nature was deeply responsive to the Buddhist doctrine, but it was equally clear that there was another side that rebelled. In some of his arguments Amar was quick to observe the influence of Sita. For instance, what excellence, he would say, could one attribute to the ideal of self-extinguishment – more especially if it was sought



merely as an appeasement of life's unrest? If pain and evil were inherent in individuality, happiness and goodness were also inconceivable apart from it. The true condition of blessedness must be one in which individuality was not extinguished but refined, intensified, and enlarged. Perfected selves, then, might be expected to continue their own existence—not primarily as enjoyers of happiness, but as centres for the radiation, the absorption, the interaction, of the world's ultimate goodness and beauty.

Amar remembered having heard this before and he could only answer now as he had answered then. Those were theories which experience could neither prove nor disprove; Buddhism was satisfied with another task; it would not choose to call itself a philosophy, or a religion, or even an ethic. It was not properly a philosophy, inasmuch as it dismissed most of the questions raised in metaphysics as entirely devoid of meaning; it was not a religion, inasmuch as it rejected dogma and made no concessions to desires that were vain; it were not an ethic, because it did not regard morality as the highest category; right behaviour, it said, was not an end in itself, but merely one of the conditions that a man must satisfy in order to reach his goal. Buddhism did not profess to explain the world or to justify it; it did no more than teach the way of deliverance. The truth of its pronouncements was not susceptible of logical proof, because the truths of logic were truths in and for logic only; they were not truths in and for reality. The truths of reality were ultimate; and, although partially expressible in terms of conceptual knowledge, were not fully apprehensible in that sphere. They had to be felt as well as heard. They had

to prove themselves in the immediate inward experience of the initiate. The teacher said: 'It is thus!' and when the learner had learnt to see that thus it was, he rested upon his immediate intuition. 'Knowledge,' said Amar, 'and by that I mean conceptual knowledge – propounds two riddles for every one that it solves. By standing outside the world to judge it, you create the subject-object relation which is a condition of knowledge, but an obstacle to the grasp of ultimate truth. The highest function of knowledge is to adjust itself to wisdom. And wisdom I define as the possession of ultimate truth. Wisdom does not answer all the riddles that knowledge propounds; it dissipates them.'

This and much more did Amar explain in the semi-darkness of his father's inhospitable guest-chamber, with the rain obstinately hissing and drumming upon the roof, and the old Rajah, as often as not, dozing in a corner. Sadly, bitterly, did Hari contrast this wintry doctrine with the summer radiance of Sita's beliefs. And was it not something of a paradox that she had brought him an experience that lent weight, not to her view of life, but to Amar's? He was flying from her because this world was so ordered that the good here below could not be realized positively; it could only be shadowed forth in the ghostly shapes of abstinence and renunciation – earthly images of the ultimate Nirvana.

In these talks Hari and Amar drew together, but in a sphere far removed from everyday life, and it could not be said that they made any advance in real intimacy. If, covertly, they were giving each other a more interested observation than ever before, the cause of this lay elsewhere; it arose through the agency of

Prince Daniyal. The position had been taking shape in this wise: the old Rajah had been naïvely excited and even flattered by the Prince's choice of a site, by the mere circumstance of his propinquity. In the first days this had been his staple topic; it inspired him with endless reminiscences of Court and camp; he took immense pride in having been on terms of intimacy with Akbar when the Emperor was a young man. It was plain that he hourly expected the Prince to make some sign of recognition of this, to show him a little more than the bare bones of civility; and while common courtesy enjoined a visit, the Prince, he made sure, would show him some small extra attention. It was lamentable, therefore, to count the days going by without this visit taking place, and to observe how a veil of chagrin thickened over the old man's earlier anticipations. First at one window and then at another he would watch with a brooding eye the activities of Daniyal's retinue; but while his feelings were hurt, his pride still held out. He did his best not only to ignore the Prince's neglect but to extenuate the unseemliness of the commotion that was made around the house.

Every day, every hour, added to the smart, and although he spoke hardly a word, one could see what form his bewilderment and pain were taking. The behaviour of Akbar's son must mean that ever since his retirement from active service he had been living under a delusion. It had been a delusion that his name was of good report, that he was remembered at Court with respect and even – by some – with affection. This was all a dream; he had been forgotten; he was nothing. But, no! it was more likely that evil tongues had been busy about him and that his fair fame had

been besmirched. Either one thing or the other; and now – well, there was no redress, it was too late to do anything.

With the spectacle of Rajah Bihar's distress constantly before one's eyes how was it possible to avoid having the Prince's presence outside the gates on one's mind all the time? And yet Hari had very soon found that the subject was not to be mentioned to Amar. Well, he thought at first, Amar no doubt did right to pass over Daniyal's unmannerliness with scorn; but later he could not rest in this opinion. Amar's obstinate silence, the air of complete indifference that he affected, became intolerable and threw Hari into an irritated mystification. A man needs must be either more or less than human not to foster some resentment at such behaviour. There was no doubt that Amar found himself in a sorry predicament; he had to choose between being a bad Buddhist or an inhuman son. But why couldn't he be more open about it? For whose benefit was he wearing this mask of unconcern, which in truth, only drew attention to the feelings that it hid. It looked as if Amar was being disingenuous with himself, as if he was unable to judge this episode on its own merits. One suspected him of taking glances into the past and into the future; of feeling that the miserable little affair made – or threatened to make – complications. The arrangements he had just completed, the course he had mapped out, – was everything to be upset by – well, just by this?

But enough! Hari went on to himself. Putting Amar out of the question, what of his own temper, his own attitude, in regard to the Prince? The moment had come when he was obliged to look closely at the matter,

because, at last, the expression on poor old Rajah Bihar's face had become too much for him and he was determined to take the affair into his own hands. In the first flush of his resolve he told himself that while Amar, not being acquainted with the Prince, could not very well take the initiative, it would be a perfectly simple thing for *him* to do so. But – was it? The more he thought about it the less he liked it. True, at the end of that hunting trip four years ago, he and Daniyal had parted on perfectly good terms; but mightn't Daniyal have changed in the interval – just as he himself had? Of course, in his own case, there was Lalita; and he hadn't the shadow of a reason to suppose that Daniyal wasn't innocent of all knowledge in *that* direction. But he honestly believed that his altered attitude towards Daniyal was not so much due to jealousy as to one of those changes that arise from a re-interpretation of character in the light of after-experience. Well then! the approach was not one that he could make so confidently after all. He would make it, but he would contrive to give the meeting an accidental appearance; nor could he feel quite happy about the manner of his reception.

AMAR spent many hours at his meditations. Sitting alone in an inner chamber, his back to the window, his eyes fixed upon a blank wall, he struggled daily with an exercise known as the Bramah Vihara. 'Let thy mind,' so the charge ran, 'pervade one-quarter of the world with thoughts of love, and so the second, and so the third, and so the fourth. And thus the whole wide world, above, below, around, and everywhere, thou shalt continue to pervade with heart of love, far-reaching, grown great, and beyond measure. And just as a mighty trumpeter makes himself heard, and that without difficulty, towards all the four directions, even so of all things that have shape or form there is not one thou shalt pass by or leave aside; but regard them all with mind set free and deep-felt love.' This exercise was to be repeated, substituting for love first pity, then sympathy, then equanimity. It was a meditation designed to break the fifth fetter, that of Ill-will. The first four fetters in their order were Delusions pertaining to the Self, Doubt, Reliance upon the efficacy of Good Works, and Sensuality. Until quite recently Amar had believed that his freedom from these shackles was won, and that he was therefore entitled to consider himself fairly launched upon the path. But that confidence had now vanished. He had been smitten with an agonizing uncertainty whether the whole structure of his spiritual life was not in

jeopardy. A seam had suddenly appeared upon the smooth wall of the edifice, a flaw which seemed to proclaim that the actual foundations were at fault. Ill-will had taken a hold upon him; and ill-will, he knew, can only subsist in a mind still obscured by self-love.

In this secluded chamber of his he had already wrestled for many hours and days, and his distress had steadily increased. He felt like a man who sees his life threatened, not by the blow of a sword, but by the prick of a pin. For his trouble in its external origin was paltry – a trifle of the meanest sort. But its very paltriness, by exasperating him, added to its venom. Deep was the humiliation of the thought that while his mother lay dying he had a mind to fret over a small piece of discourtesy on the part of a thoughtless young exquisite. That the slight was put upon his father and that his father took it so hard – no extenuation was to be found there – no, nor anywhere else. At such a time as this – no, no! To be pettily distracted at this moment of life; now, when it was his privilege to bear his mother company through her last days, her last hours, upon earth – God help him! – nothing could palliate the sorriest of such a self-betrayal. Some hidden smallness of character was coming to light; a concealed debility, a rot – and a rot that was progressive.

Every day the poison of his self-preoccupation was spreading further and further through his system. He was fast becoming a spiritual hypochondriac; his will, strong for any other task he set it, balked before this: he could not put away that particular knot of trivial concern; his pride was roused; he could

not achieve inattention to self. And the fact that he saw this, understood it, admitted it: this was the last link in the vicious circle of his self-bondage.

One morning, when he was sitting in his mother's room, there came a veritable crisis in his sufferings. His nerves had just been put on edge by a meeting with his father in the passage. In that off-hand manner of his that was so pitiful as a pretence the old Rajah announced that an application had just been made by Daniyal's chief cook: the man begged for the loan of some kitchen pots and pans; they were wanted for a supper-party that evening, which was to be a specially grand affair. Of course, said the old Rajah, he had replied that he was delighted to be of any service to His Royal Highness, delighted and honoured – of course, of course. . . . And rather guiltily, rather defiantly, he had shuffled away, bleating with a laugh that had no sense, and mumbling through his grey hairs.

It was with the flavour of this encounter on his palate that Amar sat by the window, reading aloud from the *Mahabharata*; and the magnificence of the thought and language served only to sharpen his self-disgust. Never had he felt more keenly the distinction between the essential and the trivial, the sacred and the petty; never had the wings of his spirit beat more frantically to reach the upper air; but never, alas! had his mortal nature responded more dully, never had his sense of frustration been more acute. He knew this passage so well that he had no need of the book; nevertheless, he kept his head bent over it, for he feared to meet the eyes that he knew were fixed upon him. In the last two days his mother had become so weak that it was



plain the end must be very near. Those eyes that gazed with such a mysterious intensity, those lineaments that he loved above all others – not much longer would they belong to the world of material things. Memories! very soon they would be that. And this sunny morning in this quiet room – that, too, a memory, a memory! O bitterness of time, with love such a trifle in its immensity! And those last moments of closeness, passing, passing, passing; in how many hours would they be over and gone?

He heard his voice reading in the quiet room, he smelt the jessamine upon the air, his spirit struggled. There was no haven where it could find rest. The images of the world haunted him; his old father, Hari, Daniyal . . .

In the same voice he continued to read on, but presently his gaze wandered out through the window and swept the shining landscape. It fell upon three human shapes standing in a field of emerald grass, whilst around them in a circle there caracoled a piebald stallion held on a long rein. In spite of the distance he could see everything clearly, and his ear, suddenly extending its range, caught the sound – and even the intonations – of those far-away voices. One of the men was a groom, the other two were Hari and Daniyal. They were following the horse with their eyes, and some joke had just passed between them. He could tell from their movements and gestures alone what the tone of their intercourse was. Daniyal was flinging himself about, pirouetting, and kicking up the turf at his feet. Evidently he was in high fettle, and Hari, too, seemed . . .

Abruptly Amar averted his eyes, recalled his

attention, and heard again the splendour of the verses that were falling from his lips. But what a new surge of emotion ran, hissing, over the uttered words. That meeting – he could not believe it had been wholly accidental. Hari was risking a snub to do what he himself, pocketing his pride, should perhaps, for his poor father's sake, have done. The perspiration broke out upon his brow; a hundred different ways of envisaging the case, a hundred conflicting modes of feeling, rushed forward to be examined in the grey north light of his self-mistrust. And all the time this was going on, a part of his mind was outside with those two men upon that sunlit field; another part was downstairs, in the shadows, companioning with exasperated pity his poor, foolish father; and yet another part was here, here in this room, seeing, hearing, feeling, – every sense alert.

Above all, he was conscious of his mother's mysterious regard. Whether those eyes of hers saw, or into what plane of existence her blank, dark vision penetrated, that he could not tell. Her eyes, so deeply sunk in that emaciated face, were like two holes through which a man might look into the darkness beyond life. To her, he imagined, nothing now remained but a sense of human mortality. She did not guess his anguish. No, no! She still believed in his security. She heard only the sound of his voice, which to her was tranquillity. Perhaps she had passed beyond everything now – even love. Love, which last of all would surrender its claim to life, love itself, had closed its eyes, murmured its own blessing, and died out of her heart. Certainly she was a very old woman, and very sick, and it was blessed that she should die. Blessed had she been in her

simplicity; and even so – very simply, without doubt, without mistrust – let her pass out of life.

He would leave her now. He would leave her at this moment while he had the courage to look steadily into her face. Her lids had just dropped; but she was not dead – only asleep. He could still see the pulse beating in her neck. ‘Your mistress is sleeping,’ he whispered to an attendant, and without a sound he was gone.

Back in his own chamber he made no attempt to follow a course of prescribed meditation, but threw himself upon his couch and let his anguish lead him where it would. Gradually it abated. In the afternoon he found his mother able to speak. She was at peace, as he had forced himself to continue to believe. When he left her he was happier than he had been for some time. And so the day wore on.

In the evening, as he was sitting with his book, news came that Prince Daniyal was below. Yes, only a moment ago His Royal Highness had been ushered into the guest-chamber (the servant was all a-tremble with excitement), and the Maharajah, his father, urgently besought him to come down at once. Amar inclined his head, and for a little while after the man had gone remained sitting in his place with a countenance upon which there dwelt a smile. That smile had many shades of meaning; as a comment it fell most scathingly perhaps upon himself.

Downstairs he found Daniyal seated in the place of honour with two of his gentlemen in attendance, whilst the old Rajah was bowing out his ceremonious speeches. To these manners (which had been out of date for some time) Daniyal responded with sufficient amiability,

although it was evident that not the whole of his attention was engaged. His glances wandered, and in his eyes there was a veiled gleam of amusement. No doubt, thought Amar, this distant twinkle had helped to earn for him the reputation of a man of humour. He looked as if he might be holding a witty thing up his sleeve. This, however, would hardly be an occasion for producing it.

When every one was seated refreshments were handed round and the exchange of civilities continued, the principal speakers being the old Rajah and one of Daniyal's gentlemen, whose special function it seemed to be to save the Prince unnecessary trouble of this kind. Now, at last, for the first time in his life, Amar had the opportunity of studying Daniyal at close quarters. He saw a good-looking young man of medium height, a fair-skinned, smooth-fleshed youth, who gave an impression of perfect physical well-being. Perhaps Daniyal was a trifle broad at the hips; perhaps he was a little too plump for his twenty years; his chin and mouth, maybe, were a shade too full in their modelling. But these imperfections might be considered insignificant; and perhaps it was some other and more inward blemish that reminded Amar that Daniyal was the son of Akbar by a slave. That thought, whatever its origin, was very prominently before him now, filling him with speculations about the girl whom he had never seen – that beautiful creature, who had died at Daniyal's birth – died after less than a year of notoriety, leaving her parentage and provenance unknown. Her beauty, by all report, had been of the kind that can only arise from an unusual mixture of blood. There was little doubt in many minds that she had taken

from somewhere a strong Persian strain; but the more knowing in these matters let that pass as unimportant, and insisted that her most marked characteristics – the wonderful surface, the close texture, of her flesh – gave unmistakable indications of a possibly remote, but still prepotent, Chinese ancestry.

Amar's eyes rested upon Daniyal gravely, benignly; and no one (except possibly Sita or Hari) could have guessed how diligently the work of appraisal was going on behind that smooth brow. Daniyal, unquestionably, had comeliness and ease; he wore an air of negligent authority; he was as handsome a young prince as anyone could wish to see. All the hues and curves of youthful health were there; flawless the whites of his eyes and the enamel of his teeth, fresh the skin, and the hair as glossy as the coat of a well-groomed horse. Amar's attentive smile, the gentle side tilt of his head, might well have been taken as tokens of approbation, of regard, of pleasure in the royal condescension. And it was true, and more than true, that Amar was pleased; only his pleasure was not of that sort at all, it was the pleasure of well-satisfied disdain.

How exactly had this come about? Amar himself would not have been able to say. Although he was observing Daniyal very carefully, his sentiment was not built up on any conscious assessment. It was too quick, spontaneous, and assured, for that. The scrutiny was merely confirmatory. And again, Amar's standards were so completely a part of his heritage that he was never really conscious in his application of them. All he knew was that in the presence of the Prince he got an immediate impression of vulgarity – or of something, at any rate, which for want of a better word had to be

called vulgarity. It was a pity no other term would fit, because the defect was reflected so shadowily on to the external man; it was a defect of spirit, of the innermost spirit – something that betrayed itself primarily to the moral sense.

Further than this Amar did not care to go. It suited him to rest here; to feel what he felt, to see what he saw; with that he was more than content. The only thing that troubled him now was the sense of his past foolishness. Good heavens! To think that he had allowed his pride – even the surface of his pride – to be ruffled! Well, let this be a lesson; let him mark well that he was still liable to be impressed by a name, to be imposed upon – just like all the world – by the world's own rumour. As long as the object itself kept out of sight, he could still be fooled by its prestige.

After a few minutes the Prince rose to his feet and – much to his host's surprise and gratification – asked to be shown round the room. True, the old Rajah set no great store by his possessions, but the house stood as his parents had made it, and this gave it a certain place in his esteem. So the round began, and it was not long before Amar perceived that Daniyal was genuinely interested, only his interest was not at all of the kind his father imagined. The old gentleman had remembered that Daniyal was an amateur of the arts, and from the way in which the Prince paused before this object and that, he was led to believe that his house must really contain specimens of rarity that were fit to give pleasure to a connoisseur. Very soon, at his orders, dusty old lumber was being pulled out into the light; furniture, cumbrous and grotesque in every

conceivable fashion, was dragged creaking from its corners; and Daniyal did, indeed, eye each piece as it came with an enjoyment that rose higher and higher. Throwing lively glances over his shoulder at his two companions, he loudly declared that never would he rest content until he had fitted up a room in his palace exactly similar to this. And he was speaking the truth, for it was one of his diversions to illustrate the sophistication of his taste by caricaturing antiquated modes.

Amar, in the background, followed this scene with an air of grave and yet smiling detachment. To see his father as ridiculous would have been to bring himself down to a plane within measurable distance of Daniyal's. No, what he saw was the Prince cutting so lamentable a figure that he was almost able to pity him.

When the tour of inspection was over, the Prince made ready to leave. He was in good humour now, and quite graciously he expressed his regret that the condition of the Ranee forbade him to hope that either his host or Amar would wish to attend his supper-party. To Hari, however, who at that moment came into the room, he offered an invitation.

After he had gone, the old Rajah, even more tremulous than usual, but also far more alert and erect, began strutting about the room with his most soldierly air. A fine young man, he swore; oh yes, you could see at a glance whose son he was. And this went on until it occurred to him to hurry upstairs, hoping that he might yet find his good wife able to share his satisfaction in the proud event.

His departure left the two others burdened with a

good many small embarrassments. To get rid of one of them, to let Hari see where he stood, Amar put warmth into his tone and said: 'I know whom I have to thank for this visit; I caught sight of you this morning out of the window. Really, my dear Hari, that was a crowning act of kindness.'

Hari actually coloured. 'I can't think why I didn't do it before. The Prince showed himself perfectly amiable.'

After this they went on talking about Daniyal, and although the talk had a fair appearance of naturalness, there was considerable strain beneath the surface. Nothing said was more than a half-truth; to go further in any direction would be, each felt, a dangerous and difficult venture. But contact with Amar's mind (even of this gingerly sort) had the effect of concentrating Hari's attention upon the 'vulgarity' in Daniyal. His sense of it in the past had remained floating in suspension; a drop of acid from Amar's particular fastidiousness had been needed to precipitate it.

But if he got something from Amar's sensibility, did Amar get nothing in return? It seemed not. Amar was satisfied with what he could see out of his own eyes. He was careful not to say – but he implied – that after seeing the Prince for himself he simply could not imagine how anyone should find the slightest difficulty in describing him with a single word. But there, never mind! Perhaps other people had a vision that pierced deeper than his. This unspoken comment Hari found exceedingly irritating; but he could not very well retort to what had not been said.

Just as they were about to part, however, the



atmosphere suddenly changed. They dropped into what seemed by contrast a pronounced bluntness.

‘I don’t think I shall go to Daniyal’s supper-party to-night,’ Hari announced without warning.

‘Oh!’ Amar looked his surprise. ‘Why not?’

‘I am not definitely committed.’

‘But why not go?’

‘Because I don’t like that young man.’

Amar gave a little laugh. ‘Like him? Of course you don’t! How should you? Why should you? It is merely a question –’

Hari interrupted with a bark of impatience. ‘Oh, I know your views.’

‘It would seem,’ remarked Amar blandly, ‘more polite to go.’

A little ashamed of his outburst, Hari laughed. ‘Very well then! I will.’

About an hour before dawn in that same night Amar was roused from sleep by Hari’s manservant, who burst into the room with the news that his master had been seized by Daniyal’s guards and placed under arrest. It appeared that Hari was accused of having behaved in a manner insulting to the Prince.

Amar’s emotion was one of extreme annoyance and even of dismay. He was alarmed for Hari; something serious might lie at the back of this affair; the spleen of jealousy – dangerously disclosed – on Hari’s side; or the animosity of an aroused suspicion on Daniyal’s. And then he had his own position to think about. An unpleasantness of this kind would be apt to strain the relations of all concerned. It would certainly do him no good to fling himself in on Hari’s behalf, and that was what he now had to do.

While making ready to go across to Daniyal's camp he racked his brains with profitless surmises; the thought that the Prince's rudeness to his father might have helped to bring the disaster about only served to inflame his annoyance. Without loss of time he presented himself at the Royal Tent, and although the Prince did not decline to see him, he refused all discussion, referring him to two of his gentlemen-in-waiting, with whom he was marched off. Throughout the whole length of the ensuing negotiations these two young men acted as go-betweens, and very incompetent and self-important and silly did they show themselves to be. A long, tedious comedy of recriminations, explanations and apologies (the apologies were all invented by Amar, for Hari remained sulky and obdurate) unrolled itself during the course of the morning. Hour after hour went by, at last noon came and went, and still the case remained undecided. It was illustrative of the absurdity of the proceedings that Amar never discovered how the trouble had actually arisen, nor did he even get it perfectly clear in his mind in what manner precisely Hari had offended. Nevertheless, in the end, his good offices were crowned with success; he was able to inform Hari that the Prince had relented so far as to agree to his being sent under escort to Agra, there to be detained during a further consideration of his case. 'You are getting off very lightly,' Amar went on, 'because although still technically under arrest, you will be lodged in the palace and your gaoler will be our good friend Narsing. Besides, I have been given to understand that at the end of a couple of weeks you will be told that Prince Daniyal has graciously accepted your apologies and granted you a pardon.'

He spoke in a tone of weariness and exasperation, and Hari, although he had scowled at the word apologies, had the grace to express himself grateful. A few hours later he set out under escort for Agra.

Not many days later Hari found himself once again leaning over the balustrade of the Great Terrace at Agra. During his sojourn in the palace before joining Gokal in the Hills, he had become very familiar with the wide, heat-stricken prospect stretching away below; he had spent hours gazing over it, while his heart was aching unendurably for Lalita. The countryside looked different now under its veil of green, and his feelings for Lalita had changed their colour too.

Day after day, on his journey down from the Hills, he had ridden along deeply engaged by the changing company of his thoughts. They held him in an unbroken reverie from which not even his arrival in Agra had as yet sufficed to rouse him. Vaguely he had noticed that the bazaars, so thronged and noisy before, were now comparatively quiet; the place evidently had lost half its life with the departure of the Emperor from Fatehpur-Sikri. Then, too, the wet season had commenced, but without doing much to abate the heat; in the streets people were hanging about their doors listlessly; and at the great gate of the palace, instead of the usual crowd, there was only the gatekeeper and his guard.

His reverie continued until a step sounded behind him and Narsing's voice rang out. The tone was round and hearty, but, thought Hari, unless the evening light was deceiving him, the man's face had

grown haggard and old. This hardly seemed possible in so short an interval, and yet – yes, weariness was dragging at those heavy features; and presently, as if giving in to the truth, Narsing let his tone change; he heaved a great sigh and said: ‘You won’t find much gaiety left here, I am afraid; nor will you find me a very cheerful companion. No, Hari Khan, I am out of sorts. I am dull. Dull’ – he added in the manner of an aside – ‘but not peaceful.’

While they were standing there the sun went down behind clouds and a roll of thunder came out of the distance. Hari was expecting to be questioned about Daniyal, but either from discretion or indifference Narsing left the subject alone. His mind, like his body, seemed to have become flaccid. He mopped his forehead; he drew difficult breath; his comments upon current affairs were gloomy and confused. After a while Hari interrupted him to inquire after Mabun; and at that Narsing threw up his hands and hunched his shoulders expressively. Mabun – let no one make any mistake! – was now a personage, a man of high dignity; honours had been showered upon him so that he now took his place amongst the great ones of the land. ‘Ah, that little fellow’s cleverness!’ he exclaimed at the end. ‘He seems to know everything. He makes me feel like a child.’

They were still on this topic when the man himself appeared. There was a beaming welcome in his face, his voice was as crisp as ever, his gestures had lost none of their alertness. Hari was pleased by the cordiality shown him, for he had taken a liking to Mabun during his last stay in the palace. Without a moment’s hesitation the latter began to question him about ‘that little

affair with the Prince'; but Hari, remembering that Mabun was by way of being on very good terms with Daniyal, was laughingly evasive in his replies.

During the next few days the rain was incessant and he mooned about the palace a prey to restlessness and self-dissatisfaction. Neither Narsing nor Mabun made any appearance, Narsing being in bed with fever, and Mabun – so the message went – busy with urgent State affairs. At last, upon an afternoon of dull, sullen heat, Hari ordered a horse, and, having given his *parole*, was permitted to go out riding by himself. Instinctively he turned his horse's head in the direction of the Royal Hunting Grounds and, upon reaching the wood, took a path in the direction of the deserted hunting-box where he had first met Gunevati. As he rode along memory and imagination grew busy with the scene, and his curiosity to see the place again grew stronger every moment. What a dreary aspect the house would wear under these grey skies! He could see it in his mind's eye standing wet and forlorn in the centre of its tangle of weeds. By now the weeds and vines would, he imagined, very nearly have submerged it.

After twice losing his way he came to what he took to be the place; and yet it seemed to him still that somehow he must be making a mistake. If it was the same clearing, what had become of the bungalow? Several moments passed while he stood staring; then he urged his horse forward until he came to some blackened stones with pieces of charred timber lying here and there amongst them. This, evidently, was all that remained of the building. After walking his horse up and down to scare away the snakes, he fell to searching upon the ground. It seemed reasonable to

suppose that something – some scraps of metal, for instance – might still be there. Perhaps at the back of his mind there was the fantastic notion that he might come across the remains of Lalita's riding-whip. But he found nothing at all; and after a little while he gave up, remounted, and went on again.

It was not long before he was passing by Gokal's pavilion, and then he entered the little path that he had so often followed with so eager a heart only a few months ago. Those days now seemed very distant, and the rains had changed the aspect of every bush and tree; but the little bungalow itself looked just the same, except that its wooden sides had been stained dark by the rain, and the branches of the now leafy trees seemed to hug it around more closely. It had a secret air. After tying his horse up to the broken fence, he tried the door and succeeded in pushing it open without difficulty. The room which he and Lalita used to occupy had, at his own orders, been dismantled, and it was now bare. He felt no emotion whatever as he looked about; in fact, he could not help wondering what impulse had brought him here. Noticing some marks upon one of the walls, he walked across the creaking floor and found that someone had outlined in ochre the figures of a man and a woman. The drawing was obscene, and as he examined it the thought struck him that possibly there had been an intention of portraiture. Flushing hotly with anger and disgust, he turned away and walked out of the house.

On his homeward path he was occupied with dream-like musings which had for their point of departure the burnt-out hunting-box and the obscene drawing. What hand had done these things? And was any

significance to be attached to them? Probably not. And yet every man was walking through a world of unheard voices and unseen eyes; every man was dragging along with him through life an unperceived web of observation and comment that sometimes decided his fate.

Without noticing what he was doing, he reined up in front of Gokal's house, dismounted, and sat him down upon the terrace steps. His eyes stared out, unseeing, over the lake. When he next became conscious of his surroundings it was to observe that the air was uncannily still; not a leaf moved anywhere; there was a peculiar absence of all sound. His horse seemed to feel this strangeness as well as he; it stood without a twitch or a quiver, hanging its head low.

'I am alone in the world,' thought Hari, 'and every man is for ever alone.' His sense of solitariness was overpowering, and all at once the words of the sage sprang into his mind: 'Religion is what a man does with his solitariness.' At this moment he could do nothing with his solitariness; it was too overpowering. So he started up, flung himself upon his horse, and went on again.

The next day it was too wet to go for a ride, and in the afternoon he decided that pride should not prevent him from taking the initiative and paying Mabun a visit. Making his way over to the distant wing which was reserved for the State official and his activities, he obtained admission to Mabun's small private suite; and there his host, notwithstanding the pressure of his affairs (Hari could now see for himself that the excuse was real enough), entertained him so cordially that he was encouraged to go again. He followed this



visit up with several more during the course of the next two weeks; but he still remained uncertain how far he could trust Mabun and became impatient for Srilata's return to Agra in order to question her about him. He did not have very much longer to wait, for Srilata, who had no love of rusticity, always came back to town some time before anyone else. They met, as usual, in the garden behind her house, and she confessed immediately that she was full of the greatest curiosity to hear what had actually occurred at the unfortunate supper-party. He could trust her, she said, not to gossip; and of course it was of the greatest importance that stories should not be spread abroad, lest Daniyal, feeling that his dignity was touched, should become really vindictive.

Never had Hari been better pleased to find himself in Srilata's sympathetic company, but the supper-party was not a subject that he wanted to talk to anyone about. 'For heaven's sake,' he exclaimed, 'let us leave that miserable affair alone! What do you want me to say – beyond making the admission that I lost my temper?'

'But *why* did you lose your temper?'

'I really don't know.'

'Oh, nonsense! And, anyhow – what did you *do*?'

'Well' – and he shrugged – 'the moment came when I could stand that company no longer. So I got up to leave the room – but, unfortunately, two or three foolish people stood in my way.'

'I see,' said Srilata blandly.

'There was a pause during which Hari seemed to be consulting his memory; but nothing came of it; all that he finally said was: 'Anyhow, it will soon all blow over.'

Srilata looked troubled. 'I gather that you took a violent dislike to Daniyal.'

'I confess I did.'

Srilata said nothing; and her silence told him quite plainly what it was that she was thinking: he was jealous of Daniyal; that had been the trouble.

Well, it suited him to leave it at that. Nevertheless, he must not, he felt, remain entirely dumb. 'It is a question of personality, I suppose.' He threw this out with a somewhat grudging air. 'Or you might call it a question of taste. Daniyal and his friends happened to offend my taste. It doesn't sound very important, I know; but you can see, I'm sure . . .'

What Srilata did see was that he was not inclined to go into details, and she had no idea of hammering at him. Perhaps he had resented some reference (it might have been a slighting one, for she knew her Daniyal) to Princess Lalita. Whilst respecting his reserve, she was also somewhat disquieted by it. When a man is reticent about his past follies the reason often is that he nourishes the intention of repeating them. Before taking his leave, too, Hari added another shade to her misgivings; he asked her for her opinion of Mabun: 'Just how far is that nice little fellow to be trusted? That's what I want to know,' he said.

'Not so far as me!' she answered smiling, and a rather significant pause had preceded her reply.

'Of course not; I know that. But still – within reason, I suppose?' For a second he seemed to consider deeply. 'Is he really – at bottom – such a friend of Daniyal's?'

'Yes, certainly. At least I have no reason to think otherwise.'

She said this with great decision, and it seemed to

her that Hari was allowing her words their full emphasis. But, with him, you never knew. . . . What, she wondered could he be meditating now? After he had left, she raised her eyebrows and sighed.

To get a view of Mabun divested of his charming manners, a view of him in workaday dress, that had been Hari's ambition for a long time. The way to do it occurred to him the next morning; so he put on some very old clothes and went round to the back of the palace buildings, where there was generally a small crowd waiting for an audience with the great man. Mingling in the rank and file he was duly admitted into a waiting-room, and from there, when the porter's back was turned, he slipped into the immense hall at the far end of which Mabun was transacting business. Standing among some men who were being called up, one by one, for examination, he stared across the room at what was going forward. The spectacle fascinated him. Those quick little gestures of Mabun's, the narrowing eyes, a glance that darted, an intelligence that you could see pouncing on its point. At what a pace that mind went! There was never a moment when Mabun's thought was not obviously far in advance of everybody else's. It was doubly clear now that amongst his social equals he habitually did his best to hide his advantage; but here he was ruthless; he cut his interlocutor short; his least word had a terrible trenchancy. Two or three minutes, as a rule, sufficed for each man; when the interview took longer he was weighing not merely the speech but the speaker, and then sometimes he would become leisurely, almost suave; his head nodded understandingly, his eyelids drooped. But, after an interval this

manner would be whisked off; he would straighten himself, and the few words that were rapped out sent the man smartly about his business.

At length, having seen enough, Hari pushed his way through the front line of onlookers and waited for the moment when Mabun's eye should fall upon him. It happened soon enough, and with a sharp movement of surprise the examiner paused; then presently, after dismissing the creature before him, he hurried down the room. 'Hari Khan, what brings me this unexpected honour?' Hari laughed and murmured nothing definite, but in the long, smiling look that he fixed upon Mabun something significant was no doubt conveyed. At any rate there came a pause, a brief interval in which Mabun seemed to be registering a new intimation. His manner, which in coming forward had had all its usual gay urbanity, again tightened, but with a difference. Hari had before him neither the man of society, nor the man of business, but yet another.

'Let me see,' - his glance swept the room - 'I think I can break off now. Yes, if you will excuse me for one moment, Hari Khan. . . .'

He beckoned to an assistant and gave orders. 'There, I am ready now. Follow me, if you please. I am at your service.' And he led the way out of the hall by a side door.

They went down several passages in the direction of the suite where Mabun had been in the habit of receiving him. Mabun's manner was grave, with a particular gravity that Hari had never seen him wear before; furthermore, he appeared to be revolving some very difficult thoughts. After they had gone a little

way he stopped. A decision seemed to have ripened; he halted beside a window and by its light subjected Hari to a friendly, but probing, scrutiny. 'Yes,' he pronounced at last, 'I think we might as well have our talk in here.' Taking a few steps down another passage, he unlocked a small door, and, smiling a little, he bade Hari enter. 'I will join you,' he said, 'in ten minutes.'

The room in which Hari found himself was small, comfortably furnished, but not well aired; and this at once drew his attention to the fact that the windows were so high above the ground that no one could see in from outside. The moment the door closed he began looking about him. He was conscious of an excitement which went deep, but was well under control. He knew that he was about to disregard Srilata's warning. After all, one had to follow one's own instincts about a man; and the sight of Mabun at work had, somehow, brought him to a determination. As he looked around, Mabun's rather deliberate choice of this little room was a stimulus to his curiosity. Books and musical instruments were lying about, and in one corner there was a hookah with some charred tobacco still in the bowl. (That was odd, perhaps, for Mabun did not smoke.) On a table in the opposite corner there lay an object wrapped in silk. Before this Hari paused, and then suddenly snatched it up. His fingers ran along the silk, feeling at what was underneath; then he untied the silken cord, pulled off the covering, and brought to light just what he had begun to expect - Lalita's riding-whip.

For a minute or two he stood there, looking straight before him and smiling to himself. Then he swished the

whip through the air and laughed gently. It had certainly been very tactful of Mabun to give him ten minutes in which to think matters over. But ten minutes, ten days, or ten years – it was all the same! Was Mabun the man he took him for? Everything hinged upon that.

'WELL!' said Mabun, entering briskly, 'I hope, my dear Hari Khan, you found something to interest you during my absence? Ah!' he exclaimed, his smile expanding, 'I see you did.'

Hari was still standing on the same spot and the whip was still in his hands. Swishing it through the air once more, he gave Mabun a long, level look; and the smile, on his side, was a questioning one.

'A very fine gem that – in the handle,' Mabun remarked with the gentlest of malice.

'Oh, very!'

Amusement was reflected on both faces, and it was with a particularly friendly shade of courtesy that Mabun invited his guest to be seated. He himself sat down on the same divan, facing and quite near.

'My dear Hari Khan' – and his delicate hand fluttered out to give a reassuring touch to Hari's knee – 'I am going to explain everything as quickly as I can. You must on no account be disconcerted. Your secrets are quite safe in my keeping.'

Hari nodded. Although he certainly had every reason to be disconcerted, what he experienced for the moment was rather a feeling of elation.

'Incidentally, I shall have to tell you a good many secrets of my own,' Mabun continued. 'It is fortunate that we can trust one other, because, as you will see, our paths have met and we are destined to travel along

side by side. Now, first of all, listen to this: Prince Daniyal is no friend of mine.'

At this – so prompt and unequivocal a confirmation of his suspicions – Hari almost started; at any rate, he revealed his feelings sufficiently to cause Mabun to smile and say:

'Yes, that is important, is it not?' A slight pause underlined the words before he went on: 'And now, something more, my friend: for the last three years I have been busy weaving a net in which to snare the Prince; and at last my net, I think, is strong enough to hold him. For the last three years, Hari Khan, I have studied my man; all his goings out and comings in have been watched. The task has not been easy because it would have been fatal if the Prince had formed suspicions. And he is cunning. . . . Oh, always taking precautions! Never off his guard! For example, on the evening of your arrival in Agra (Ah, how well, you and I, we remember that evening, Hari Khan!) he gave my agents the slip. When they picked up his traces again he was recovering himself from a slight accident – a slight accident, Hari Khan, a slight accident!' – and Mabun's eyes twinkled gaily. – 'He had been knocked down by a horse and stunned. As you can imagine, I made every effort to probe into the affair, and I finally discovered what company the Prince had been keeping; I discovered on what errand he had been bound. My dear Hari Khan, let me confess that I was overcome by blank astonishment! The Prince as a Vamachari, it was unthinkable! As we know, he has no taste for women; still less is he to be suspected of religious fanaticism. And yet – there was no mistake! One explanation alone offers itself: he was seeking a new



sensation. It was a flight from ennui, from the boredom in which he is everlastingly imprisoned. Ah!' murmured Mabun, after a moment of apparent musing, 'may you and I never know to what an inferno of boredom a man may descend!'

'This discovery was the most important I had yet made. I continued to push my inquiries in every direction; I re-examined all the witnesses I could lay my hands on; I left no stone unturned. Nothing more came to light until one of my men brought in to me that whip. He had found it in the thatch of the cottage inhabited by that girl, Gunevati. When I saw the gem in the handle I knew at once from whose hand the whip had fallen. I gave orders that Princess Lalita should be watched, and a few days later of course I knew everything.' Mabun laughed gently. 'I knew then what kind of goat you had been hunting in the mountains; I could follow the movements of your mind upon that fateful evening five months ago. Oh, you were very clever in putting us all off the scent! Allow me to congratulate you, Hari Khan, on that; and still more – if I may do so without impertinence – on your love affair – for, indeed, the Princess is very charming – but most of all, most of all, my friend, I want to congratulate you on *this*: fate, through me, is putting great power into your hands; you and I, between us, we can bring confusion upon Prince Daniyal; we can destroy your rival and safeguard the future of the Empire.'

Laughing gaily at the flourish of his own rhetoric, Mabun sprang to his feet; and an unfeigned excitement sent him tripping lightly up and down the room. Opposite there was an alcove, and it was characteristic

of the man that, even in this dance of exultation, he stopped to take a look behind the curtain hanging over it, as if one could never make too sure of one's privacy. Never had Hari seen him in any aspect even remotely resembling this. Here was the real Mabun, the delighted machinator, the ardent plotter, the enthusiast for intrigue.

After a minute he was back again, and in a voice hushed by its own intensity he proceeded to expound and explain. Everything went to show that Akbar's rage against the secret sects was reaching its culmination; with great pomp and circumstance he had just elevated the Prince to High Priesthood in the Din Ilahi; the explosives were all ready; so now for the spark, the spark!

Hari was listening, attentive indeed, but apparently half dazed. The minutes passed; another hour passed; and still Mabun's fluency was the same. It was curious that in all this time Hari's demeanour did not change. He sat there heavily and hardly said a word.

At last, after a truly magnificent peroration, the display was over; the flashing, sparkling torrent of Mabun's eloquence had run itself out, or rather – so abrupt was his descent into tranquillity – the appearance was given of a tap being suddenly turned off. With a sigh – not too deep a one – the orator relaxed, seemed to take stock of his results, and his gentle smile admitted that they were not wholly satisfactory. Well, no need to be discouraged yet! He gathered himself together again, but obviously for an experiment in another line. He laid a hand once more upon Hari's knee, a small brown hand that greatly resembled a monkey's, and in a quiet voice he said: 'Hari Khan, I

see that you are still mistrustful. But why, I ask, do you not rely a little more upon your insight into character? Am I so difficult to understand? For my part, I trust my insight, and that is why I speak to you without fear. Oh yes, how should I not know you, when five minutes with a man is all I ever need. Let me point out this, Hari Khan: there is all the difference in the world between the judging of a character and the judging of a lie. All men lie; and almost any fool can lie well enough to take in even a clever man. But with character it is different. It is very difficult for a man to conceal what he really is. Oh, *I know you* well enough, my dear Hari! And when I say I know a man I mean that I know what kinds of things he is prepared to lie about, what kinds of people he will lie to, and what kinds of reasons he will have for so doing. Few people lie entirely without reason, and in most cases the reasons are good. So many people ask to be lied to and deserve nothing better. You see, it takes two to make a lie; and it is the stupidity, or the prejudice, or the self-conceit, of one party that makes the lie necessary. Hari Khan, you are a man to whom certain lies would be most repugnant. But there are more important things in the world than truth-telling, my friend! And sometimes it is a sin to be squeamish. Is that not so?" For a brief instant only he paused. It was evident that he did not really wish for an answer. "Are you waiting for more evidence of my confidence in you? Well, well; you shall have it! You shall have it! But is it not time that you opened your mind to me — just a little — in return?"

At the end of this strange dissertation Mabun laughed softly, looking deep into Hari's eyes as he did so.

Nothing could well be more engaging, and Hari smiled and stirred uncomfortably as if only too conscious of his churlishness.

'Mabun Das,' he said at last. 'Ask me what questions you will. I will not refuse to answer them.'

Mabun sketched a light gesture in the air. 'Why should I want to catechize you, my friend? Are *you* not the best judge of what I should be told? There may be things I should like to hear; there may be things I have no business to hear. You are not a fool, Hari Khan. You guessed that I was no friend of Prince Daniyal's; else why did you come to me this morning?'

'Yes. I guessed that.'

'Exactly.'

Hari pursed his lips. 'Forgive me! I take no interest in politics.'

'My friend,' said Mabun slowly, 'if you are involved you are involved. But why trouble yourself about the political aspect of the affair. Leave that to me. Let this question stand in your mind as a personal one.' He paused. 'Let it be simply a question' – he paused again and leant forward with very bright eyes – 'a question of planting your heel upon the neck of the cobra.'

Hari considered and finally gave a nod. 'Very good. What then?'

'First of all,' said Mabun decisively, 'there comes this quarrel of yours with the Prince. You must let me know how you stand.'

Hari got up and stretched his cramped limbs. 'I don't know if you will understand me,' he said in a quiet voice; 'but even now I am quite uncertain what my feelings about Daniyal really are. When I say I

detest him, does that cover the whole ground? The Prince, even as a boy, commanded my admiration. And the other day I found that his personality worked upon me like a challenge. I know him to be courageous. He is prepared to follow his wickedness wherever it may lead him.'

Standing in front of Mabun, he looked down into his face and frowned thoughtfully. 'I suppose you want to hear about that supper-party?' There was an inflection in his voice at which Mabun inwardly smiled. He, too, like Srilata, knew his Daniyal well, and with a ready tact he set about helping his interlocutor out. That brilliantly-lighted tent and those twenty or thirty young men, for the most part powdered and scented – how well he could imagine it, he mused aloud. He, in his time, had assisted at more than one such gathering. But no doubt for Hari it had been a new experience; – and not an agreeable one? Oh no, in fact really rather nauseating. . . . That chatter, those finikin manners, those airs of *petit maître* and *petite dame* combined. The sniggering delight they took in one another's mean little immoralities! Yes, yes, he could well see how Hari's impatience, his disgust, must gradually have reached boiling point; but – how had the crisis come? What, actually, had happened?

The blend of curiosity and sympathy in Mabun's manner was really intensely droll; and Hari laughed out loud; it was a laugh made rough by the memories evoked. 'I will tell you exactly what happened, and you shall judge whether I had any excuse for losing my temper. Late in the evening a certain fair-haired youth, who was sitting next to Daniyal at table, left the room and presently returned dressed in a girl's clothes.

Sitting himself down by Daniyal again, he proceeded to mimic Princess Lalita in her speech and manners. Daniyal was evidently prepared for the entertainment, for he played up. He completed the scene by fondling the creature and addressing him as "Lalita darling."

Having spoken, Hari waited for Mabun's comments; but none came. For once in his life Mabun was experiencing disgust – or, at any rate, he had the tact to make it seem so. For a decent interval he turned his head away; then, after brushing the displeasing images aside – 'The report,' he said in a studiedly level voice, 'the report stated merely that you had acted in a manner insulting to the Prince. I should like to ask: What did you actually do?'

Hari repeated what he had said to Srilata. 'And that's the whole story.'

'You spoke no word to anyone?'

'I said nothing at all.'

Mabun nodded and closed his eyes. 'What we have to consider is whether Daniyal acted with the express object of making you reveal yourself. I mean, has he any suspicions? I was a little surprised, I confess, on your arrival here, not to receive a private letter from him. You must remember that he looks upon me as a personal friend.'

The silence that followed was a heavy one. Mabun's eyes were fixed upon Hari intently, but even in their steadiness they seemed to scintillate. Hari began to walk slowly up and down the room.

'Well, we shall see!' Mabun brought out in the end. 'The order for your release is a little overdue already. If it does not soon come . . .'

Hari gave a brief laugh and continued his march

up and down. He had no idea how long Mabun and he had been closeted together, and his eyes wandered to the door. Without waiting for a further hint Mabun rose to his feet, and briefly they arranged for a renewal of the talk next morning. Quite unaware that he was still holding Lalita's whip in his hand, he was on the point of leaving the room when Mabun laid a detaining hand on his arm.

'Are you taking that whip with you, my friend?'

Hari broke into a laugh.

'Oh Hari! Hari!' And Mabun with a head-shake drew him firmly away from the door. 'Tell me! since your arrest you have not, I hope, had any communication with the Princess?'

Hari coloured. 'Yes. I sent her a word of warning. How could I refrain?'

'Of warning?'

'Certainly. I said: "Marry the Prince if you will, but know this - "'

'It was rash.'

'I took every precaution.'

'You cannot even count upon her destroying your letters.'

'I think I can.'

Mabun made a gesture of impatience. 'If we are to be fellow-conspirators, my dear Hari . . .'

'Fellow-conspirators is rather a strong word, isn't it, Mabun?'

'Why do you pretend to be half-hearted? I know you to be a man of spirit.'

Hari fixed Mabun with intensity. 'What exactly are you expecting of me?'

'In the first place, discretion, circumspection.'

‘And then?’

Mabun smiled and shrugged. ‘Oh, merely your testimony, your testimony. Nothing more “political” than that!’

Hari paused and considered. ‘I wonder,’ he said reflectively, ‘I wonder why you dislike the Prince so much?’

‘Your wonder is not very flattering,’ laughed Mabun; ‘but, in point of fact, the Prince is nothing to me. I am working for the welfare of the Empire.’

Hari received this in silence.

‘Akbar will die soon. The astrologers have foretold it. It is undesirable that Prince Daniyal should succeed him. Can you doubt it, Hari Khan?’

Hari shrugged. ‘For my part, I don’t profess to be unbiased. But this question of our future ruler is an important one; and I should have thought that a man like you, immune from personal prejudices, might well have given the preference to Daniyal. He, at any rate, has intelligence; whereas his brother is likely to set the whole Empire by the ears.’

At these words Mabun took a few steps away and surveyed Hari with eyes narrowed in an effort of the deepest deliberation. Then suddenly he began talking with extraordinary earnestness and fluency. ‘I will explain. Listen to me carefully, I beg. These are my reasons for preferring Prince Salim to Daniyal. Daniyal is in league with Mobarek and what Mobarek stands for is not good. That little Persian is called a mystic’ – and Mabun snapped his fingers in derision – ‘but he is also a typical ecclesiastic. He has a vision of the unification of temporal and spiritual powers in this



land. His mind has been dazzled by the splendours of Byzantine sacerdotalism at the height of its glory. He is an authoritarian; his ideal is a rigid hierarchy. He sees in the caste system, in the privileged position of the Brahmins, machinery ready to hand . . . and in the Emperor he finds a man endowed with the prestige, the potency, and perhaps the ambition, to give feasibility to his scheme. That is Mobarek! And if any man can make that dream of his come true, Akbar can do it. But Akbar will always be Akbar, a living man, an individuality, not the impersonal figure-head, the impassive symbol of an all-powerful Church. After Akbar there must be Daniyal, because Daniyal is ready to lend himself to these designs. Imagine a Holy Indian Empire with an Emperor-Pope at its head! And imagine the Emperor-Pope to be Daniyal, a debauched youth, surrounded by eunuchs and catamites; a living idol with painted cheeks who would be exhibited with ecclesiastical pomp before his prostrated subjects once or twice a year. The position would amuse Daniyal; it would appeal both to his cynicism and to his love of all that is meretricious and spectacular. The best part of his time he would spend in a seclusion of incredible magnificence, entertaining himself lightly, in the fashion of his set, with music, art, literature, and — sodomy. Everything much in his present style, but without any restraint . . . and without wanting for money.'

Hari looked at Mabun dumbly; the rush of his words had been completely overpowering. Mabun stepped back a few paces and gave him a malicious little smile.

'Before you go,' said he, 'let me make my position

absolutely clear. I am a secret supporter of Prince Salim's.'

Hari's look continued to question.

'I mean,' said Mabun with another touch of impatience, 'I mean that I am plotting with Salim for Akbar's dethronement,—should it prove necessary. I fear that it may, and that before long. There is the danger that Akbar will crumble the Empire to pieces in his own hands before he dies, or that at his death he will hand it over to Daniyal. Neither of these disasters shall occur if I can help it. Unless Akbar returns to his senses, unless Daniyal and Mobarek are disgraced and banished, Salim must take the throne. Now there you have my position in a nutshell; I have confessed all; I have confided in you without reserve. Please think my words over, Hari Khan, and to-morrow we will continue our session.'

HARI spent the remainder of that day pacing up and down the Great Terrace with bowed head or halting to stare vacant-eyed over the balustrade. At times he still felt a certain elation, even a kind of gaiety; and yet reason insisted that his position was, in reality, a most anxious one. He was not so simple as to look upon Mabun's confidences as merely flattering; no, they were not that; and still less were they reassuring. First and foremost, they provided him with a measure of Mabun's sense of power; they opened his eyes to the degree of his own entanglement.

In all this affair it was the element of entanglement that he chiefly objected to; the sense of being caught, of being pressed into the service of a cabal. Of course the fact that Daniyal was already his enemy and that he was already disposed to support Salim did materially ease the situation. But, unfortunately, it was in his character to turn obstinate at the least hint of coercion, and although Mabun had been tact and consideration personified, he found it hard to overlook the fact that Mabun had the upper hand. If he was going to work against Daniyal in favour of Salim he would do it in no other way than his own way, and by his own will, and at his own time. All his life he had stood clear of parties and factions. It seemed absurd that a trivial accident should plunge him into a life and death partisanship.

What manner of man was this Mabun, who claimed him as a fellow-conspirator? The question posed itself with greater urgency than ever. To get a comprehensive view of Mabun's character, to knit all the disparate elements together into an intelligible whole: this was his task. There was perceptiveness and sensitiveness in Mabun, there was ambition (probably in excess), and, above all, there was a ruthless devotion to purpose. Of the minor egotisms, personal, frailties, and petty vanities, he could find but little trace. It was as if the man had grown tired of himself as a person and preferred to be simply a machine. In his hunt for clues Hari went over everything that he had ever heard about Mabun's private life. The little there was came to this: he had started in life as a petty scribe, his quick wits had carried him rapidly upwards, intelligence and industry seemed to be the sole secret of his success. At sixteen he had married a girl of about his own age, and she had died less than twelve months later in childbirth. This was the only chapter in his life that stood out in detachment from the rest. Not many weeks after his wife's death he had attempted suicide and for the space of one year he had walked the world like a ghost. Then suddenly all had changed; his life had resumed its flow; very soon he took another wife, and then concubines by the score; at the present time, in fact, he was reputed to keep about a dozen separate establishments and to be the father of thirty or forty children.

Now, did that history, put next to the living present, throw any illumination upon the inward life of the man? Hari was seeking desperately to get a notion of the mainspring of that existence; he wanted to know

what were Mabun's underlying emotions, his compelling beliefs, and what part they played in his life. Well, perhaps he *was* able to form a sort of idea. Perhaps the plain truth was that Mabun was taking the world simply as a gymnasium in which to exercise his abounding energies. Probably it was a waste of time to look for ultimate motives, spiritual allegiances. Anyhow, taking Mabun for just what he seemed to be, Hari liked him – liked him increasingly – and his respect kept pace with his liking.

And now, to come right up to the actual issue; his co-operation was wanted by Mabun, and something quite definite in the way of co-operation. Could he bring himself to do what was wanted? Mabun considered that the evidence of his honourable friend Hari Khan would be of immense value in bringing about Daniyal's disgrace. Nor was there any fault of reasoning here. In a country where nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of every thousand were ready to perjure themselves for the price of a bowl of rice, the character, the quality of a witness, was everything. There were very few men, even in his immediate entourage, whose word Akbar would respect; and one of those few Mabun believed his friend Hari to be. Exactly. And it was, therefore, particularly unfortunate that were this same trusted and trustworthy Hari to stand up before the Emperor and speak as Mabun wished, he would be perjuring himself and bearing false witness.

That was the crux, the hidden, distracting heart of the affair. That was what had been oppressing him, holding him in a kind of semi-paralysis, from the moment that Mabun had come out with the statement that Daniyal was the victim of the accident in the wood.

Hari knew it was not so. Upon seeing Daniyal again at close quarters he had been obliged to reject the idea quite definitely. And although Mabun's story had thrown him momentarily into a daze, as soon as his mind had cleared he had not only seen the lie for what it was, but had measured its use and its purpose. In the first place Mabun had thought it not impossible that he, Hari, might in all innocence be able to conjure up a false memory in support of a story told with such calm assurance. Failing this, however, the lie, even when detected, might, Mabun would suppose, be a very pleasant one to accept. Moreover, his dear friend Hari would, he trusted, accept it in the spirit in which it was offered — accept it, that is to say, as a tribute to his delicacy of feeling. The kind intention was to make the necessary piece of perjury as easy as possible. He hoped so to arrange things that no one — not even he himself — need ever know whether his friend Hari was wittingly or unwittingly bearing false witness. It was considerate, it was exquisitely tactful, it was just like him. The better you knew Mabun the less unpleasing did the sinuosities of his mind appear. The little man had done his best; and when he saw that his story about Daniyal had not gone down, when he saw that Hari was in danger of blurting something out, how adroitly he had pleaded for silence! That little dissertation of his about lying—it had had a hundred different meanings, but primarily it had been intended of course as a gentle nudge, as a hint, as a prayer that Hari would at least take his time to think, to consider, to weigh carefully. . . .

Yes, little by little, the elements in Mabun's character were falling into place, and with the effect of making

Hari feel that the man was – in spite of so much – worthy of trust. You were not to misjudge him simply because he was considerate of your pampered conscience, of your snobbish adherence to a certain code. His own whole-heartedness, his own single-mindedness, lifted him far above all such indulgences. What he saw was the magnitude of the political issue, the great things at stake; and one had to admit that the disproportion between these and one's own small scruples was pretty large; one's own private and personal distaste for perjury was not an impressively weighty factor in the opposite balance.

When the time came for continuing his talk with Mabun, Hari had made his mind up definitely upon one point. He intended to have the truth exposed in all its nakedness; and if he had grown not a little ashamed of his scruples, he would, none the less, spread them out before Mabun's reproachful eyes. Strung up to a high pitch, he was starting along the passage when a messenger stopped him with a polite but hurried note begging him to defer his visit to the afternoon. The intervening hours dragged unendurably; what in the world could Mabun find worthy to take precedence of their affairs?

At last he was marching once again along the endless corridors to the suite where all his talks, excepting the last, had taken place. A servant was posted at the door; and this man, instead of admitting him, led the way further along to the same little room as last time.

Whilst waiting for Mabun he wandered restlessly about and finally explored the curtained alcove behind which Mabun had glanced. At the back of it he found a door; and, putting his ear to it, he fancied that he

heard someone moving on the other side. As he was debating whether to try the door or not, Mabun came in; and on that he emerged from behind the curtain, looking, no doubt, more than a trifle self-conscious. Mabun, on his side, seemed to him to be less composed than usual; he had the air of bringing with him harassing preoccupations. It was with a rather satirical smile that he said: 'Have no fear, Hari Khan. That door is locked, and I hold the key.'

Without further comment on either side the two men seated themselves on the divan as before; and as before Mabun took the lead. Confidently assuming that Hari was ready to follow him, he began at once to develop and elaborate his theme.

Hari tried to be patient. There could be no harm, he imagined, in letting Mabun talk as much as he liked; nevertheless, after a while, he began to grow restive, and finally he made – or tried to make – an interruption. By his air Mabun could see what was coming – that face of discomfort, that frowning and fidgeting – oh, it was clear enough! And poor Mabun, with a look of agonized supplication, went on talking faster and more urgently than ever. He refused to give up hope; when Hari broke in, he tried to drown his voice; and when Hari spoke louder, his accents grew shriller still. For a minute or more this ridiculous contest went on. It ended with a sudden extraordinary seizure of nervousness on Mabun's side; he grasped Hari by the arm; 'Less loud, my dear friend; less loud, I beg!' and his gaze fastened anxiously upon the curtain opposite. Really it seemed ridiculous that they should be exposed to any risk from eavesdroppers; and Hari exclaimed loudly in his impatience. Nevertheless, the next



moment it appeared to him that the little Bengalee's face had 'turned an extraordinary colour. How was this? Had Mabun any reason to suppose . . . had his ear caught some sound . . . ?

He was still leaning forward and frowning perplexedly when the outrageous, the unbelievable thing happened. From behind the curtain there resounded the clatter of a piece of furniture overturned, and this was followed by the mutter of an oath.

Hari drew back; he and Mabun looked at one another; there was silence. Two or three seconds passed thus. Then another oath sounded, and this time it rang out with the violence of passion let loose; the curtain was viciously pulled aside, and a tall, gaunt man lurched into the room. This person's appearance – to say nothing of the mode of his apparition – was somewhat alarming and at the same time somewhat ridiculous. From between his eyelids, much inflamed by drink, his small, wild eyes shone with the light of fury. 'Enough!' he shouted out hoarsely. 'Chatter, chatter, chatter! By Shaitan, you are both accursed!'

Hari and Mabun had instinctively sprung to their feet; and Mabun, who a moment ago had been tense and livid, now began dancing up and down from the ferment of his emotions. But to speak he had no chance; for the newcomer, sweeping the glare of his frenzied exasperation from the one to the other in turn, continued to hold the field with the splutter and bellow of his rage.

In these moments it dawned upon Hari who he was. It was Salim. Impossible as it seemed, it must be Salim. Strangely accoutred (no doubt he considered

himself in disguise), half drunk, and bursting with ineffective irritation, he nevertheless managed to offer an imperious, if not a wholly dignified, figure. Staring, Hari began to revive a definite memory of those features; and when he glanced round at Mabun for confirmation, the latter, throwing out his hand in a gesture of despair, said in a strangled voice: 'His Royal Highness Prince Salim.'

At this Hari saluted with all due ceremony; and Salim, letting himself drop heavily down upon a chair made acknowledgment with a scowl.

'Permit me - ' began Mabun. 'If only Your Royal Highness will deign - '

'Sit down, monkey!' roared Salim. 'Haven't you chattered enough already? Sit down and be quiet! Merciful Allah!' and he went on cursing through his beard.

Mabun obeyed, but Hari remained standing.

'Sit you down, too, Hari Khan,' Salim growled out after a pause. 'I am coming to business with you. You'll find me a different customer. Yes - and now that you are talking to *me*, perhaps you will talk better sense.'

Hari inclined his head. 'I will do my best, Your Royal Highness.'

Salim grunted. The tone of this somewhat puzzled him, for he was accustomed to browbeating; he liked to play the bully, and although his bark was notoriously worse than his bite, it was not often that anyone dared to stand up to him.

'Look you! I am tired of hair-splitting. I am going to come straight to the point. We are talking about that accident in the wood. You recognized my brother well

enough, and that's an end of it. I advise you not to try my patience too far, Hari Khan.'

'I beg Your Royal Highness's pardon but -'

'Nonsense!' shouted Salim, mightily slapping his thigh.

Hari smiled and kept silence. He had recovered his composure, and although his spirit was roused, he had his temper well under control. As for Salim, if he, too, kept silence for a minute, it was because his accumulated irritation was simmering and seething without finding an adequate vent.

'You know who I am,' he cried out at last, 'so take warning! Collect your wits, my good fellow, before it is too late. I know you for the scoundrel you are. I hold your life in my hand. What I say I say, Hari Khan. You recognized my brother, Prince Daniyal. If you deny it, you lie. And then . . .'

Swaying about on his seat, he let his small eyes, glittering wickedly, finish his sentence for him.

'Again I beg Your Royal Highness's pardon,' said Hari. 'I think you must have heard me just now, when I was saying - or trying to say - to Mabun Das -'

'Permit me! One moment!' interjected Mabun, springing in despair from the divan. 'It is no use going back over old ground. No, no! Let us start afresh, let us forget! The subject must be approached from a new angle. To be sure, there is some way out of the difficulty. Only let us leave it until to-morrow. A little time for reflection, a little patience, a little -'

'A little money!' broke in Salim with a snarl. 'The fellow wants money, I suppose, or honours - or Allah alone knows what! Otherwise he must be stark staring mad.'

So speaking he turned upon Hari a look that was

intended to be offensive – and so, indeed, it was. A little of Hari's temper slipped past his self-control; a slight flush mounted.

'Up to now,' he pronounced deliberately, 'the trouble has been that I could not honestly identify the man, who, Your Royal Highness declares, was Prince Daniyal; but now . . .'

At these words a look of blank horror spread over Mabun's face, and Salim – almost unable to believe his ears – leant forward with a strange growl.

'Well, now,' continued Hari, 'I really believe I can identify that man with some confidence. It was Your Royal Highness himself.'

Salim made a noise in his throat; and his hand fumbled after his dagger. 'Idiot!' he brought out, half rising from his seat. 'Idiot and –'

Hari sat firm and fixed him with a level look. For two or three seconds he felt that he had been an idiot indeed. Salim, every inch a swashbuckler, swayed now forwards, now backwards, and perhaps it really was nothing more than chance that finally dropped him backwards into his chair again. With a bark of forced laughter he flung out a hand: 'Look at him!' he called to the quivering Mabun; 'Hark at him!' and he shook his fist. 'That – that is the man you said would be of use!'

Mabun appeared to have exhausted all his emotions. 'In any case,' he said dully, 'Hari Khan is a sympathizer, I am prepared to answer for him personally.'

Salim shut his eyes for a few moments and pursed his lips. When he raised his lids again it was to study Hari with a resentful, baffled curiosity. 'The fellow really seems to be a lunatic, a half-wit!' he commented

to himself. 'What does he want? How does he hope to save his wretched skin?' Suddenly he swung round at Mabun, thrusting his face at him with a sneer. 'You answer for him, do you? Well, I should advise you to take care. What if I were to inform the Emperor about his little intrigues? What would my father have to say about that, eh? Or my brother either, for that matter? He and his Princess! He and his Princess! And yet – look at him! He has the impertinence to sit there and contradict me. Bah! Get me some wine, Mabun Das. All this talk has parched my throat; – besides, it is my hour.'

Mabun got up, hesitated for a moment, and then disappeared through the alcove into a room beyond.

'You will find the doors all unlocked,' Salim called after him, chuckling. 'And next time you try to shut me in . . .' He slapped both his thighs, laughed, and turning to Hari – 'A good little man in his way, but fussy! Thinks he can treat me like a child. He loses his nerve, you know; it is always the same story, every time I pay him a visit. But I come disguised, as you see. I know what I'm doing. It wouldn't do for my father to catch me, that's true enough. Not that I should get much more than a scolding, but poor Mabun would be thrown to the elephants. Oh, yes, he's on tenter-hooks, I can tell you!'

Hari smiled politely and remained silent. Salim, who was evidently craving for his wine, pressed his hands wearily over his eyeballs and blew out his lips. 'This is the hour at which I allow myself five cups,' he informed Hari. 'Five cups and no more.'

'Your Royal Highness is temperate,' returned Hari pleasantly.

‘My brother Daniyal drinks in secret. Did you know that? You mark my words, he will end like poor Murad.’

Hari found nothing to reply, and after a moment Salim began humming to himself. It was fairly evident that his abstraction was feigned.

‘By the way, Hari Khan,’ he said all at once, ‘there is something I have been meaning to ask you. What has become of that girl Gunevati?’ He paused, then leant forward, and after sending a glance in the direction of the alcove, said in a lowered voice: ‘If you want to do me a service, Hari Khan, you will find that girl and send her over to me at Allahabad. This is between you and me, mind you; for Mabun Das, although a good little fellow in his way, is no use in an affair of this kind. I tell you he is as nervous as a cat . . . always afraid of betrayal. He thinks the girl is untrustworthy . . . tells me he has hunted everywhere and can’t find her. Says she has disappeared – been murdered! All lies, of course! Curse him, I always know when he’s lying to me. But if you will find that girl, Hari Khan, I will overlook all your damned impertinence. Do you see?’ With these last words he got up, went and peeped cautiously behind the curtain and tiptoed back. Giving Hari a grin and a wink: ‘Just coming!’ he whispered.

When Mabun reappeared, it was with a wine-jug and some glasses. Salim was sprawling in his chair again and humming abstractedly to himself. As soon as the jug had been set down he seized it and poured out a glassful. ‘Good stuff!’ said he, and after tossing off three glasses in quick succession he looked around him with benignity. ‘This is what my royal father used to

drink when he was my age – only he drank twice as much. We are very much alike, he and I. I love him. And his love for me is beyond all bounds. But there it is! He is old. He has lost his wits and persecutes true believers. You, Hari Khan,' and he raised his finger at Hari, 'you, a good Moslem, will understand that my duty towards Islam comes first. And after that comes my duty to the Empire. To the Empire! – why, even this unbelieving dog, Mabun Das, is able to understand that. Allah and the Empire! It is for them I strive. It is for them I am here now; I risk my life – but what of that? It is all done gladly, gladly!'

Another half-hour slipped by while he continued in much the same vein, and in the meantime seven glasses, as Hari counted, went down his throat, although he repeatedly declared that he was taking but five. Mabun sat opposite, very watchful and collected, licking his lips from time to time like one who has many words to repress. As for Hari, he was longing to take himself off, and directly a suitable occasion arose, he exchanged glances with Mabun and got up. Salim, who by now was considerably fuddled, made no attempt to detain him, and his withdrawal was ceremonious but rapid.

ON his way back to his room Hari could not help smiling broadly to himself. Poor Mabun! How many and various were the difficulties he had to contend with! All this multifarious human material – what foolish, mulish stuff it was! For a man who knew his own mind, saw his goal, and had the will, the wits, and the heart, to make for it – for such a man what a spectacle his common fellow-creatures must provide! Ordinary human nature, compact of inconsistencies and prejudices, inconstancies and irrelevancies – what must it appear in his eyes! And what a life's task to be continually humouring, cajoling, and threatening, the infinite waywardness of mankind! No wonder Mabun's hands fluttered, no wonder his eyebrows sometimes twitched! A hundred times a day no doubt he had to remind himself that just this was his business: to compensate with his own brains for the stupidity of others, to make up with his own care for another's carelessness, with his own foresight for another's shortsightedness, with his own untiring industry for the almost universal indolence of men. It was his business, day in, day out, to manipulate a thousand fragile threads and never let one snap, to pick his way through mazes of intricate detail and never lose his grasp, to be tripped up by every form of sublunary folly and never relax his smile.

Besides, this was to say nothing of the freakishness of



blind chance. It could only be by some quite incalculable piece of ill-luck that this last episode had occurred. But was the mischance really a serious one for anybody concerned? His own feelings, Hari reflected, remained exactly the same. He was far from harbouring any resentment against Salim. The Prince was a perfect specimen of a boor; but that he had always known. If Mabun was feeling distressed and apologetic, he must make haste to comfort him. His conscience still sided with Mabun; and if he obeyed it, the fact that Salim would think he was intimidated or actuated by self-interest, ought not to matter to him at all. Salim's opinion of one was not a thing to be considered.

Towards sunset on the same day, as he was sitting with Narsing on the terrace, Mabun made his appearance. There was no change in his demeanour, his step was as brisk and light as ever; he joined in the conversation with all his habitual deftness and urbanity. In the course of the last three weeks it had become abundantly evident that Narsing was seriously out of health. It was his habit now to spend many hours upon a couch in a corner of the terrace; but as soon as the sun dipped below the horizon he would drag himself wearily indoors. On this occasion, no sooner had he withdrawn than Mabun turned upon Hari a rueful, sardonic regard. Together they went and leaned over the balustrade; and after gathering reassurance from the few words that Hari let fall, Mabun made a rapid plunge to the heart of his subject. It was Salim he now had to talk about.

'Yes, my dear Hari,' he was presently explaining, 'Salim's passion for Gunevati, although less than two months old, introduces another tiresome element into

the situation. He became completely infatuated after the last meeting of the fraternity – a meeting that took place only a few days before Gokal carried the girl off to the Hills. Since then Salim has been clamouring for her and giving me a lot of trouble. Of course I have the best reasons in the world for disapproving of this connexion. Just consider what Gunevati is! Could anyone be more dangerous? Were Salim to take her into his harem, Daniyal's spies would begin ferreting into her history and it would not be long before Daniyal would be in a position to bring against Salim just those accusations that we are arranging to bring against *him*. But you have seen for yourself what Salim is! His demand for Gunevati is in character with all the rest of his behaviour. My dear Hari, these visits of his to Agra in disguise! This hiding in the palace! These religious orgies in that hunting box under his father's very nose! All these are follies that imperil the cause and drive me to the verge of distraction. And then he persists in trying to bribe or bully me into giving up to him a part of his father's treasure lying in these vaults. In fact that was his object when he made the first of these secret visits, which are the curse of my life. Oh, I assure you, Salim is a very unwelcome guest here! But what can I do? He sends word that he is coming; he comes; and I have no choice but to take him in.'

Mabun's looks were really pathetic; he threw out his hands helplessly; but the pause he made was not a long one. 'Thank God, my dear Hari, I find in you a man of common sense. I hope you understand that ever since I got to know you (I mean when you were staying here two or three months ago) I have been acting as

your friend. It was a lucky chance that threw us together at that time, for it was in those weeks that Gunevati betrayed you to Salim, who at once requested me to put you out of the way for fear lest you might have recognized him in the wood and be minded to denounce him. I had to convince Salim that you yourself were too heavily compromised to be dangerous, and I pointed out at the same time how useful you might be in lending weight to an accusation against Daniyal.'

Here Mabun paused and seemed to be waiting.

'So, even at that time,' said Hari, 'you already had your designs.'

'Exactly!' smiled Mabun, 'and now I am coming to that. Daniyal has no alibi, because he was secretly closeted with me at the very time that the accident in the wood took place. He was successfully persuading me to yield to him what I have consistently refused to Salim – a part of his father's treasure. And presently, my dear Hari, you will see why.'

An hour had already gone by, but the evening was warm and still, and accordingly they arranged to sup on the terrace together. During the meal the talk turned on indifferent topics, and Hari was glad of the opportunity for a little further reflection. No sooner had the servants withdrawn, however, than Mabun started off again.

'My dear Hari, there must be a great deal in my scheme which still remains ambiguous to you. A great deal, too, that sounds almost fantastical. Now let me anticipate your objections. You are not tired? You are prepared to listen a little longer? That is excellent!' And for the next three hours Mabun's talk flowed on with

hardly a single break. His discourse opened with an analysis of Akbar's relationship to his sons. Salim, in spite of all his insubordination, was still the favourite; there was a natural bond of affection between these two, whereas of Daniyal the Emperor had no understanding whatever. Daniyal was cunning, pliable, outwardly full of respect, and exceedingly adroit in keeping his father in ignorance of his true character and disposition. Through his friends, notably through Mobarek, he instilled into the Emperor a false picture of himself, and at the same time, naturally enough, everything was done to blacken the character of Salim. Of his two sons Akbar really knew little but what came to him through the mouths of others; it was a situation that gave intrigue its fullest scope, and unless the question of the succession were to be resolved by force of arms, the envenomed arts of calumny and intrigue would be paramount up to the very end.

The battle-ground was the mind of Akbar, and the peculiarities of that mind conditioned the tactics to be employed. 'Listen to me very carefully, my dear Hari, for here I begin to deal with what is probably your first and most obvious objection to my scheme. "Why," you ask, "why go to the pains of bringing up against Daniyal a charge which is comparatively trivial and completely false, when there are doubtless many weighty and true offences that might be preferred against him?" Well, let us examine the offences that you have in mind and let us see how Akbar would regard them. In the first place, there is the taking of human life. But this, when done by emperors – and what I say holds good for royal princes as well – goes by the name of secret execution and is regarded, if not

as actually permissible, at any rate as excusable. Akbar, who has resorted to secret execution on many occasions himself, would certainly not be roused to any great anger against Daniyal on this score. Consider next the charges of robbery and blackmail. Those actions when committed by princes go by the names of forced loans and private fines. It is quite true, of course, that Daniyal is in the habit of extorting enormous sums from his friends by threatening to charge them with conspiring with Salim, but Akbar must already be aware of this, and he certainly would not make it a cause of quarrel with Daniyal; anything, in his opinion, being preferable in a son to the asking of money from his father. There remains, then, the suggestion, my dear Hari, that Daniyal should be arraigned for the form of immorality to which he is actually addicted. But here again the proposal will not bear examination, for, although it is quite true that Akbar would object very strongly to Daniyal's vices were he to see them as they are, there is not the smallest chance of his doing so. In his mind sodomy is associated with stories of youthful Greek heroes bound together in death-defying friendship; it reminds him, too, of his own early days and of rough, manly loves amongst the young warriors of the Steppes. Sodomy, in his view of it, is at the furthest possible remove from effeminacy or perversion. It is an excess of virility; it is merely the young fighter's peccadillo. Then, too, how could Akbar, even if he were so minded, publicly take exception to sodomy? Why, such an attitude would be regarded by those of his own race as an insult not only to the country of his birth but to the memory of his illustrious ancestors. And in this country, too,

amongst us Hindus, sodomy, you must remember, ranks only in the fourth degree of misdoing, it takes an inconspicuous place with "dissimulation, looking disrespectfully at a Brahmin, and smelling any spirituous liquor, or anything extremely fetid and unfit to be smelt." No, my friend, if you consider my scheme far-fetched and my way of going to work devious and unpractical, you are falling into a common error. One cannot build straight roads in the country of the human mind. You must not regard your own standards and opinions as universal. We must take Akbar as we find him. We cannot make him see Daniyal through *our* eyes; to reach our ends we must paint Daniyal in colours that will make him odious in *his* eyes, in the eyes of the actual living Akbar.'

'This being conceded,' Mabun went on, 'the merits of my scheme become patent. For Akbar all offences fall into two categories; offences against God, and offences against himself; and the matter is again simplified by the fact that in his mind these categories very largely overlap. He has always looked upon a king as "a shadow of God," and recently he has made the belief that he is the actual representative of God on earth, the corner-stone of his new religion. Well then! the situation speaks for itself. In accepting one of the highest offices in the new priesthood Daniyal has played into our hands. If we can show that at the very time when he was making these public professions he was also indulging in secret ceremonial orgies as a member of one of the sects that Akbar holds in greatest detestation, if we can do this, Hari Khan, then Daniyal is lost.'

After a few moments of impressive silence Mabun

began again. 'Akbar is about to preside over another Court of Justice; he will sit in judgment upon those accused of offences of this sort, and he has sworn an oath not to consider rank, dignity, or position. Now, I have arranged that his investigations shall show that the thing he hates is not only in the ranks of the base-born but close to the Throne itself. Thus, step by step, and in circumstances of the greatest publicity, he will be led on in the direction of Daniyal, until at last an indictment becomes inevitable. Then, and not till then, Gunevati and her associates will be produced, and they will say what I have ordered them to say, because their lives depend upon it. Someone, no doubt, will raise his voice to protest against taking the testimony of the base-born against the word of a prince, but that objection will be met by the call that I shall make upon you.'

Hari was silent; and perhaps it was to prevent the utterance of the protestations that he saw gathering behind his frowning brows that Mabun ran hastily on into speech again. 'The evidences against Daniyal will not only be unimpeachable, but various. There will be found in Gunevati's possession jewels traceable to him, and amongst these Akbar will recognize some as belonging to his own treasure. Offences against his purse, as you know, drive the Emperor to madness. In hot haste he will order my arrest and examine into the extent of his losses. At this juncture my life will be in danger, for his messengers will find a part of the treasure gone. But I shall recover it for him; my agents will find it in the cellars of Daniyal's palace, and then . . .'. At this point Mabun waved his hand airily, smiled, and fell into silence.

The look of gloom upon Hari's face did not seem to be lifting. 'I am afraid I am wearying you,' Mabun said softly. 'Why should I trouble you with details? My only object is to convince you that I have been careful and painstaking in my arrangements.'

With this he ceased and remained quiet, but obviously not without great effort. While his lips remained closed, his eyes dwelt upon Hari's face with an eloquent anxiety. 'Can you refuse,' they seemed to say, 'the little thing I ask, when I have already given – and am still ready to give – so much.'

Hari sighed, brushed his face over with his hands, and even groaned aloud. These methods were natural and proper to Mabun; in Mabun they were not unbecoming. A born intriguer, and conscious of the excellence of his cause, he could go forward dauntless and unashamed. Besides, he was the leader; his was the detached intelligence – impersonal, disinterested, manipulating its instruments. But what of the wretched tools themselves, and in particular that base instrument, Hari Khan? Allah! What a sorry charge was being laid upon him! Could he ever humble himself sufficiently to play his allotted part?

At last, after having left Mabun's side and taken one or two moody turns up and down the terrace, he came back and said: 'Would to God I had killed Daniyal on the night of the banquet! Would to God Salim had persuaded you to destroy me out of hand! I tell you, Mabun, those courses would have suited me better than this. I can give you no promises, no assurances of any kind. I detest public affairs. Your machinations weary me. I hope I may succeed in persuading myself to do as you wish, and that is all I can say.'



Mabun laughed gently and grasped him confidently by the arm. 'Say no more, my dear Hari Khan. I shall never forgive myself if you continue to fret. No, no, you must on no account worry. I dare say we shall manage well enough by ourselves – Salim and Gunevati and I.' At the conjunction of these names he laughed merrily. 'If I think you are a little foolish, that doesn't prevent me from entering into your feelings with deep sympathy.'

Hari faced round and looked him up and down with an eye that was full of liking. Mabun was all smiles and gentle mockery now, but even so, one could detect the fire and fixity of his purpose behind. Mabun against Daniyal! The mongoose against the cobra! Yes, he liked this little mongoose well. And how vividly he could visualize the nimble, gallant little creature, coat bristling, eyes like sparks, crouching tensely for a spring at its coiled and watchful enemy.

He was silent, until, after a while, his thoughts took another turn. 'Mabun!' he cried, 'not many days ago I was almost ready to renounce the world altogether, and that was before you had begun to plague me!'

The look of amusement upon Mabun's face deepened. 'I don't see you in a cloister yet awhile, my friend.'

Hari looked up into the starless, moonless sky. Heavy clouds could be felt moving across it. A few big drops of rain splashed upon the marble flags.

'No, perhaps a cave in some mountain side would be better.' He smiled, and then went on inconsequently. 'If a man like Akbar is to be cast aside after a few years like a worn-out shoe, what are the uses of ambition, energy, and valour?'

Mabun emitted a long-drawn sighing breath. 'God grant that Daniyal and Mobarek may fall and that Akbar will continue to reign for many a long year. Is not that precisely my object? Is it not *that* I am working for?'

'But Salim – in his impatience for the throne –'

'Bah!' and Mabun snapped his fingers. 'If necessary, I would betray him into his father's hands. No harm would result.'

Hari threw up his head and laughed. 'Forgive me, Mabun, but in my ears all this sounds a little glib. History does not take its shape like a clay pot – even when the potter is Mabun Das.'

'I do not pretend to omnipotence – but I am practical.'

'Too practical. Your ends fall within the range of man's vision. The world is not governed by men with their definite ends, but by fate with its unintelligible purpose.'

'Unintelligible indeed!' scoffed Mabun, but with the greatest gentleness.

Hari continued unabashed. 'If the day ever arrives when men gain control of their worldly courses, that will be a sign that the end of the world is at hand. It will mean that men have taken the wrong turning and committed spiritual suicide without even suspecting it. Having encompassed their limited perfection, there will not be one human being left whose life is worth preserving, and God's thumb will descend and crush the whole.'

'I seem to be assuming the mantle of the prophet,' he went on after a pause. 'I must have borrowed it from Narsing, who surprised me this afternoon with many solemn utterances. He maintained that Akbar, in spite

of all his follies, was the fountain of our spiritual life in this age. He prophesied that after Akbar's death the Empire would crumble into corruption. I listened respectfully.'

They were both standing by the balustrade, and Mabun's eyes continued to look steadily out into the thick, sultry darkness.

'Poor Narsing!'

'Is he so foolish?'

'I mean: he is dying,' Mabun replied softly. 'And for him death is hard.'

'Dying? Are you sure of it?'

'Quite sure. I know his disease. He did not tell you that he was dying—no? Nevertheless, he knows it as well as I, only he will not accept the truth.'

Hari turned away from Mabun, and as he once more fronted the darkness Narsing's recent looks and words floated back into his mind invested with new and pathetic shades of meaning. When he next spoke it was to inquire whether Narsing would live long enough to see Akbar again on the latter's return to Fatehpur-Sikri.

Mabun shook his head doubtfully, and then fixed upon Hari a look which the latter was at a loss to understand.

'Akbar will never return to Fatehpur-Sikri. I do not mean that he, too, is to die. What I mean is that Fatehpur-Sikri is already dead.'

Puzzled, Hari knitted his brows.

'It is so,' continued Mabun, now again gazing tranquilly into the night. 'Fatehpur-Sikri is as dead as if the grass were already growing among its stones. In fact, grass *has* already sprouted in the pavement of the

Great Court; I myself saw it when I went there a few days ago.'

'No city should ever have been built upon that spot,' he continued after a pause. 'Akbar chose it because it had been the abode of the saint who promised him the birth of a son. Nevertheless' – and Mabun's inflection was very delicate – 'Nevertheless, it was an ill-chosen site. The reservoirs upon which Fatehpur-Sikri depended have all cracked; the water has escaped; the ground in that region is brittle and hollow; and now the city is doomed. Of course it is being given out that all can be made good, but – I tell you this in confidence, Hari Khan – that is absolutely untrue. It is impossible to construct reservoirs on such ground. Waterless the city will remain. Soon it will be a ruin.'

Hari made no reply. With his eyes turned in the direction of Fatehpur-Sikri he followed the memories that drifted across his mind.

After a pause of some length Mabun straightened himself, gave a smile and said: 'I hope I have not depressed you, my friend? Alas, the truth is the truth, reality is reality, and there is no escaping it. At least,' he corrected himself, 'there is no escape for a man like you.'

Hari gave a laugh, and together they strolled towards the entrance arch, for it was time to part.

'What do you mean by reality, my dear Mabun?'

'Oh, I am no philosopher. By reality I mean Maya – the phenomenal world, Illusion, if you please to call it so. But for us illusion alone exists; we live in it; it is our life; let us accept it! Hari Khan, if there is a God, it is our Hindoo God – Shiva, the dancing

God – Shiva, the sportive God, who out of the superabundance of his energies has created the world for his play. Do not be depressed. After Akbar another will arise. Individuals are nothing. Shiva dances on!’

It was late that night before sleep put an end to Hari's meditations, which were of a gloomy cast, being chiefly concerned with the vanity of earthly ambitions and desires. In the darkness of his room he saw again the soft, silent blossoms of light that had unfolded upon the sky-line over Fatehpur-Sikri five months ago; and in the great span of the ages the blossoming of empires seemed scarcely less brief. Then, too, there was poor Narsing, upon whom his thoughts lingered with a more intimate melancholy. He wished he could resemble little Mabun, who knew how to watch time's flight unregretfully and without awe.

When he awoke the next morning, however, his disposition was entirely changed. It was in a spirit of ribald indifference that he regarded the fate of Fatehpur-Sikri, and thinking of Narsing he said: 'At the age of sixty a man has lived long enough. It is death no less than birth that keeps the world fresh and young. There must not be too many old eyes to look at it.'

He was taking his first turn upon the terrace when two letters arrived; one was from Mabun and the other was handed to him by a messenger who came direct from Amar. Tearing open Mabun's letter first, he learnt with a surge of thankfulness that the order for his release had arrived. This matter, as he now realized, had been weighing upon him more heavily

than he had cared to admit. Amar's letter was less cheerful. That the old Ranee had died he was quite prepared to learn, but Amar went on to say that his father remained so stricken by her death that he had found it impossible to leave him. He had, accordingly, written to Sita to suggest that she should join him at Ravi; but Sita had replied with the distressing news that Gokal was dangerously ill and that to leave him all alone was not to be thought of. 'Since then, however,' Amar went on, 'I have heard that the worst is over, and by the time you get this letter Sita will be on her way to me, bringing Gokal with her. He is still very weak, I fear, but we are all agreed that the change of scene may hasten his recovery. A little while ago, when he thought he was dying, the idea that you were a prisoner and unable to come to him was a burden upon his mind. Now that you are free to come and go as you please, you will, I am sure, wish to visit him here; for, although out of danger, he is by no means himself again. All this time Daniyal has remained exceedingly incensed against you, and I think it is partly due to my representations that he has given you your liberty so soon.'

Hari read this letter over several times. It contained one or two rather puzzling implications; it gave him the idea that not all had been said. Amar was always cautious with his pen: that he knew. Nor did Amar ever err on the side of over-statement, and so – without being unduly perturbed – (for, after all, it was said quite definitely that Gokal was on the road to recovery) he determined upon an immediate departure. He was glad that his discussions with Mabun would be cut short; glad, too, that he would be spared another

meeting with Salim. The thought that Sita would be at Ravi he did not dare to dwell on; but it was in the most joyful mood that he set about making his preparations for a start.

Although Amar's letter had provided him with a good reason for sudden departure, he was a little nervous of what Mabun might find to say; but to his deep satisfaction Mabun was perfectly agreeable. Far from attempting to delay him, he rendered him great service in finding good horses and equipment for the journey. Everything necessary appeared as if by magic, and it was at noon the same day that he rode off.

Great was his relief at putting Agra behind him. As his horse ambled along he never tired of gazing over the flat, open country and into the wide sky above. Utterly weary of his own particular little tangle of affairs, everything outside was attractive. The road was bright with village folk, for the rains had just passed by, and a mild sun was drawing the moisture up from the rice-fields that glittered through the swathes of a white mist.

A few days later, when he was climbing up into the mountains, the way became more solitary; and by this time, too, his sense of leisure had forsaken him. It was replaced by an impatience which never abated until he had actually reached the entrance of the little valley of Ravi. With the evening light behind him he gazed over the familiar water-meadows towards the distant roof of the old Rajah's house. It was flushed by the sun when he first caught sight of it, and stood bright against its background of trees. There was an exquisite freshness in the air, a smell of wet grass and the bell-like tinkle of the small green marsh-frog. A flock of wild



duck eddied up from the reeds a few yards away, flew round in a circle, and settled down again. Their movement lent an even greater tranquillity to the scene, and he dropped the reins of his horse, letting it wander here and there cropping the rich grass. So deeply did this valley stir his emotions that he was seized with the impulse to turn round and fly from it. He was reminded of the old Ranee who had died, and for some reason that he could not understand he thought of the dead with envy. What greater blessing could any man look for than to fade out of individuality into the wide peace of such a scene as this? What could be better than to feel the knot of selfhood loosen and one's spirit flowing over those luminous spaces between the tranquil level of the earth and the brightening stars? Ah! then would one learn what it was to breathe, not with the quick, hot breath of humanity, but with the long, slow rhythm of the earth herself.

As he rode forward again he noticed a change in the landscape; Prince Daniyal's encampment had been transferred to the other side of the lake and in its place there stood a humbler group of tents, presumably Gokal's. On arriving, it was to them that he directed his steps, and very soon he came upon Gokal himself lying upon a couch in the shade of a great tree.

Anxiously did he scan his friend's features and it seemed to him that they had not only grown thinner but acquired a new sternness of cast. The impression made upon him in the first hour of their intercourse was that Gokal was wrapped in a profound calm, but as the evening wore on he saw that this calm was unnatural – or, rather, that it covered a feverish unrest.

In its main outlines the story that Gokal had to tell

was simple enough. It was barely three months ago, as Hari now remembered, that he had jokingly warned him of what might easily happen if he persisted in keeping Gunevati by his side. But Gokal had paid little heed at the time, and later, as his infatuation deepened, he had become still more thoughtless. If he continued to see the girl as she was, he never drew the practical conclusions, never anticipated the probable results in life as it went on from day to day. Because her smiles were always ready, because she had the indolence of an animal and never seemed to notice time slipping by, he imagined that all the desires of her nature were fulfilled. Why should she grow bored, when she could amuse herself the whole day with the tinting of her lips and eyelashes, or the trying on of this dress and then that? Was she not enjoying comforts and luxuries that she had never dreamed of before? She appeared to be without ambition; and it was not for a long time that she gave a thought to money, wanting only to gratify her small passing whims when they came. Later on, when she began to value an ornament for what it was worth, Gokal paid no heed to the change. He did not notice that after a day or two her costlier adornments would be discarded and were never to be seen again. He missed the significance of the fact that at this time, too, she became variable in her moods. The fits of petulance that alternated with her childlike gaiety only made her more attractive in his eyes. Thus it went on, until one day, not long after his evening meal, he was seized with violent sickness. The sickness persisted; his condition grew worse and worse, and finally he fell into a coma. In the early morning Sita received a message from his frightened servants to say that their

master was nearly dead. She hurried to his side, and found him unconscious, with a pulse that could hardly be felt. By great good fortune it shot into her mind that there was an old herb-woman living in the neighbourhood. The woman was summoned, she got to work, and after four hours of her ministrations Gokal was out of danger. His first inquiries were after Gunevati; where was she? had she been stricken down in a similar fashion? If not, how came it that she was not at his side?

Courageously Sita decided to take upon herself the dismal task of telling him that Gunevati had mysteriously disappeared. She and Gokal had been in each other's company much more frequently since the departure of Hari and Amar. She had become completely tolerant of his infatuation, and although Gunevati was never mentioned between them, he knew well enough what her attitude was. It was thus from the standing of a friendship which had become very close that she spoke out and broke the news. For a minute or more there was complete silence, while Gokal looked at her with an uncomprehending stare. Then, gradually, as his mind adjusted itself, a faint flush coloured his ashen cheeks, and at length letting his lids sink he turned his head away. Not until two days later did Gunevati's name pass his lips, and then it was to ask if Sita would mind looking in the girl's room to see if any letters or papers throwing light on her departure had been left behind. Sita found paints, powders, and dresses, all thrown about; the room was in confusion, but no papers were to be seen.

On a broad general view Gunevati's behaviour was intelligible enough; but the case, when looked into more closely, presented certain rather mysterious characters.

A plan had certainly been made out beforehand and with the aid of abettors from outside. This much Sita saw clearly; but for her part she certainly had no inclination to probe deeper, nor did Gokal express any wish (he certainly lacked the means) to set regular investigations on foot.

For nearly a fortnight his physical prostration was complete. Later, as his strength returned, he seemed to be trying to forget; and it was his greatest pleasure to listen while Sita read aloud to him. In the talks that followed from this reading their intimacy sank its roots deeper still. Sita found herself opening her heart to him as she had never done to anyone before. One day she confessed that she no longer loved Amar. It was true that Amar remained her dearest friend upon earth: 'But friendship' – she said it with a sigh – 'is not the same as love. Amar,' she went on, 'has withdrawn his heart from the world. I am left behind, but I do not complain, because I know that he must follow his Path. Love to him does not mean what it means to me, and I truly believe that this difference in our ideals puts us further apart than if he were actually in love with somebody else.'

Gokal looked grave when he heard this. It would be the saddest thing imaginable, he reflected, if Sita and Amar were to allow a real coldness to settle between them now. Unless they were to part with a perfect understanding on both sides, how could they bear to part at all? In their separation each would be haunted by remorseful thoughts. Nothing more tormenting for her nor more distracting for him could be conceived; his progress would be fatally impeded; and she, guessing it, would feel in great measure

responsible. The dread of such a calamity Gokal might have dismissed as fanciful, had not Sita's words made him feel the prick of another sharper anxiety. He asked himself – and not for the first time – whether Sita and Hari might not be in danger of falling in love. Hitherto he had taken reassurance from the openness with which she would talk about both Hari and Amar; she seemed to have nothing to hide. And now, one day, by way of a test, he told her that in a letter written from Ravi, Hari had declared that he was growing weary of the world and that when he next went back to his own country, it would be to immerse himself in the study of Buddhist philosophy. Sita took a moment's thought, then she smiled and said: 'That only shows that Hari does not yet understand himself. This world will always be real to him; he finds value in the actual moment. His character in this respect is very different from Amar's.' And then, when Gokal pressed her: Amar, she went on to say, was more conscious of the past and future than of the present itself. Amar was concentrated upon what was to come, and to that extent even his most unselfish actions were interested, for they were steps on his way to his goal. Hari's very egotism had a disinterested quality, which it took from the fact that he was at the mercy of emotions that were not ruled by his individual will. 'I have that in me which deeply sympathizes with Amar,' she concluded rather helplessly, 'but another part of me rebels against him.'

Gokal frowned. He was perhaps fonder of Hari, but he felt that it was to Amar that he owed his deeper allegiance. 'You must remember this,' he replied, 'to Amar the moments really worth living are moments

of inspiration – moments when life's profoundest problems become sharp in outline and an answer is half seen. To Hari, inspiration is something different. His inspiration goes, as you say, to light up the actual minute; it shines upon the stuff of life; but does it, I ask, go so far as Amar's towards the up-building of his spiritual being? Amar's inspiration is a deep inward fervour, in the heat of which the fine gold of wisdom is melted out from the dross.'

'When Amar speaks of wisdom,' said Sita with a smile of melancholy, 'he means something different from me, something tending away from life. As for me, I simply cannot think of wisdom and the poetic spirit as things apart. Surely poetry is wise? and poetry requires the whole of life, all the senses of life, all that you touch and hear and see, for its material.'

This conversation was one of many that took place on Gokal's verandah with the afternoon sun slanting through the garden trees. Gokal's strength was slow in returning, and if his weakness took the edge off his mental distress it permitted his melancholy to spread far. Hour after hour he would meditate despairingly upon the anomalies in his character. He was able to see Gunevati as she was, and yet he still craved for her, and found himself constantly trying to extenuate her misdoing. In his despair he veritably longed for death, and yet his bodily condition was a perpetual anxiety to him. So solitary was he in his mind and in all his mental habits that society had never afforded him any true pleasure, and yet he found solitude unendurable. Contemplating the world from a height and truly despising its vanities, he, nevertheless, was awed by worldly greatness and remained a respecter of persons.

Many of his thoughts he confided to Sita, but there were others that he was ashamed to confess. One day, for example, when she asked for the meaning of the sardonic smile upon his face, how could he confess that he was thinking how all night he had lain awake tormented by memories. He had remembered how one morning upon his journey up to Khanjo, he was buying Gunevati some trinkets from a wandering pedlar, and being put out at last by her lamentable want of taste, he let fall a slighting word and a sneer. It was the memory of her wince and blush that now haunted him. It filled his nights with remorse. Remorse! No wonder his smile was sardonic!

This being the general tone of his mind, he not only found comfort in Sita, but was astonished by her power of consolation, which went far beyond anything that he had thought possible. For the first time in his life he realized the full possible value of loving-kindness as a factor in human experience. Up to the present he had been held aloof from Christianity not merely by its dogmas but from an inability to accept its fundamental principle: he could not allow to Love the importance given to it in the teaching of Christ. In other words, Christianity had presented itself to him either as a system of theology which he could not accept, or as a species of Humanism – and Humanism he detested as being simply an ethic from which the highest spiritual values were omitted. But no one could accuse Sita of losing sight of those elements in religion which elevated it above any merely altruistic doctrine. She had a sense of poetry that matched his own; she had an understanding for the heroic, the sublime. Of set intent, accordingly, he surrendered himself to her

spiritual effluences, letting the balm flow, and awaiting, passive and yet attentive, whatever revelation might emerge.

To Sita herself, however, he was very sparing of his admissions. He had it upon his conscience to say nothing that could possibly reinforce her prejudices as a Westerner against the oriental outlook. To her he would often maintain with uncompromising rigour that the tendency of Christianity was to exalt the ideal of social duty at the expense of the ideal of self-illumination. It flavoured with an unwholesome sweetness the pure springs of idealism; a slightly materialistic, and at the same time slightly sentimental, element was introduced. The intellectual part of religion was subordinated to the emotional, or else thrust aside altogether, truth being handed over to science as the only domain in which the idea had any meaning left to it. And thus the ancient and unmatched conceptions of wisdom and holiness were driven from men's minds, and metaphysics was neglected as unnecessary.

At other times, however, he liked to allow himself the luxury of sounding the full, rich chords of philosophic despair. He would quote from Ecclesiastes, and on one occasion he said: 'Sita, more than four thousand years ago there lived in Egypt a fellow-creature of ours who wrote these words: "Lull thy heart to peace in oblivion; so long as thou livest follow the call of thy heart and be happy. Never weary of following thy desire and vex not thy heart while thou sojournest upon earth. It is not given to man to carry his possessions with him. None that have gone have ever returned. Tears cannot refresh the heart of him who lieth in the



grave. Therefore do thou make holiday and have no care.”

‘Yes; that is the first word in wisdom,’ replied Sita, smiling, ‘but, Gokal, is it the last?’

On this afternoon, as it so happened, he was sensible of an undercurrent of peace, so after a moment he returned her smile and went on: ‘Do you remember, I once said that the riddle of the universe would be solved only when men had reached a state of consciousness in which the riddle, as such, did not exist? Well; you might say to me now that the beauty in life would be triumphant if men had the eyes to see it. Could they but see around them the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace, that grace would be there. You love the world of appearances because it is the world of poetry, and it is possible that you are justified. It may be intended that after the ascent into communion with the One there should be a descent once more to the Many – but with the knowledge of Oneness retained. This is the doctrine of Plotinus and of Dionysius the Areopagite.’

These days came to an end when Gokal was well enough to make the journey to Ravi. He seemed to bear the discomforts of travel well enough, but on his arrival he suffered a relapse, and then he ceased to reproach himself for having hinted to Amar by letter that nothing would please him better than that Hari should return.

■

THAT night Hari and Gokal sat up to a late hour watching the moon spread its light over the lake. The evergreen oak under which they sat stood upon a small promontory and threw the shadow of its dark, thick foliage on to the silvered water. A light breeze was blowing from the opposite shore; it brought with it a just perceptible strain of music that came from Daniyal's encampment. One could almost believe the old legend that moonlight playing upon water once made a harmony audible to Lakshmi's ear. In the long pauses that fell between them the two friends felt that the bond of their union was close indeed. They shrank from spoiling the beauty of this hour with difficult and painful topics.

To-morrow, thought Hari, would be soon enough to tell the story of Salim's passion for Gunevati. Unfortunately, to withhold this intelligence altogether was out of the question, if only on account of the light it shed on the mystery of her disappearance. It looked more than probable that the Prince's agents had taken a hand in her flight and had carried her off to their master's palace in Allahabad. On his side Gokal was thinking that he must not delay too long in speaking to Hari about Amar and Sita; he would tell him how anxious he was that their approaching separation should not be marred by any failure of understanding and sympathy. Hari would be quick to take this

as an admonition, if anything of that nature was needed.

It was after midnight when they parted, Hari betaking himself to a tent that Gokal had prepared at no great distance from his own. The same gentle breeze was ruffling the lake and the moon was still clear in the sky; nevertheless, at dawn Hari was awoken by the violent flapping of his canvas and the beat of heavy rain upon the roof. A fierce squall was driving down the valley, and after a while he rose, fearing lest the tent should be torn away; but before he had finished dressing the rain had passed; the sun was shining; and the wind, although it continued, was much less violent.

Stepping outside, he looked about him and never in his life had he seen a morning lovelier than this. The massed clouds were flying away before the sunrise that gilded their rolling whiteness and suffused the uncovered sky with a pale greenness that melted into pale blue. Flocks of wood-pigeons were hurtling through the air, the lake was bright with hurrying wavelets, and all the trees around the camp were flinging leaves and raindrops upon the wind.

No one was yet about, and presently he wandered into the garden of the Rajah's house. In its old-fashioned way this garden was pleasant to the eye. The Persian style had not yet come into vogue when it was laid out, and so the designer had been content with a naïve imitation of the Chinese. Little streamlets and ponds had been arranged here and there, with dwarf willows hanging over them, and in the background clumps of heavy-flowered magnolias, flame-leaved azaleas, blue hydrangeas, and feathery

bamboos. A few exotic trees planted by the old Rajah's father were certainly rather out of place, but there was something pleasing in the very simplicity of the taste that had put them there. Hari sat down upon a bench, and at last the thoughts of Sita which he had been suppressing for so long crowded irresistibly into his mind. He wondered what their meeting would be like; but even now, with his heart beating at the thought of it, he was afraid to give his imagination rein, and starting to his feet, he began wandering again along the narrow, winding paths.

In a little while he was halting beside the largest lakelet, which had a Chinese bridge flung over it, with the usual willow trailing its light green foliage on the water. As he was looking down at the pink lilies he realized all at once that the wind had dropped; everything had suddenly fallen into a complete tranquillity, not a leaf was now astir. Three huge blue and white butterflies appeared and began tumbling about over their own clear reflections. From where he stood the house was out of sight, although it was not more than a few yards away; and presently voices were to be heard in that direction. His heart began to beat once more as he listened for Sita's voice, and in a minute, sure enough, it rang out quite loud in the still air. To his amusement it sounded the note of temper; and, smiling to himself, he made a cautious approach until only a thin screen of shrubs separated him from the open window at which – to judge by the sound – Sita must be standing. She was talking to Amar, whose replies came muffled from the room behind. Her tone continued to be exceedingly cross, and Hari's smile broadened as he realized that he was overhearing a

regular domestic quarrel. It was strange, perhaps, that he stayed to listen, especially as he had a horror of the revelations that spring from certain changes of voice or manner when people are carried away. In his time he had heard more than one fine lady lose her temper and always to his disillusionment. Yet now, he stood his ground, and, listening, fell into a positive enchantment. Sita could let herself go as much as she pleased, she could storm and rage, but no harm would ensue. Nor did the unfortunate Amar lack dignity, although plainly he deserved his scolding. What he had done was to leave the shutters of the adjoining room open with the result that Sita's best dresses had been soaked through by the rain in the night. Hari's amusement increased every minute; indeed, a quite extravagant joyousness took possession of him. As he stood there amongst the flowers and butterflies the world seemed to him a place of extraordinary beauty. Living appeared to be a wonderfully simple thing after all. You had but to throw away the trouble and worry of taking things unto yourself, and then all the earth would be yours to enjoy in a disinterested ravishment. The striving between man and man would have vanished; Paradise was as simple as that.

Pushing his way quietly through the shrubs, he crept up to the window itself. Sita was no longer there, but as he peeped into the room he caught a glimpse of her sitting at table with Amar. She showed her profile whilst Amar was presenting his back. There were tea-things before them and a plate of Kashmiri biscuits. Now and then a sigh came from Sita, and her eyes kept wandering over her dresses, several of which were hanging out near the window to dry. Hari waited for

her glance to fall upon him, and after a minute she turned her head, gave a slight start, and opened her eyes. He had put a finger up to his lips to enjoin silence, and she obeyed the signal. Smilingly he motioned to her to join him in the garden and, although evidently a little mystified, she nodded her consent.

Waiting for her at the corner of the house, Hari was conscious only of an immense, unhopèd-for happiness; and he said to himself: 'What is this? What is this?' His feelings sharpened into a sense of agonizing sweetness; his being was invaded by an anguish that was delicious and seemed to play not upon the nerves of the flesh, nor upon the machinery of the brain, but upon the substance of the very soul. In another moment Sita appeared and they went down together in silence through the trees until they were beyond sight or sound of the house. Then he stopped her and looked into her eyes; and her face, which had been smiling when she joined him, was now grave, as if a veil of secret wonder had descended over it. She seemed to be marvelling inwardly, her eyes were deep with divination, and she waited. What he said he hardly knew, but the colour deepened in her cheeks, and the long breath that she drew seemed to be shaken by an inward tremulousness. For a brief space they stood thus, and while he continued speaking to her her eyes wandered from side to side, but her hands lay quiet in his. At last she closed her eyes, in order, maybe, to shut out the sound of his voice, or, maybe, to hear it yet more clearly. Did she understand what he was saying? Had she really caught a breath of the wild, spiritual fragrance that was working a miracle upon his heart? A smile had dawned upon

her upturned face, and it seemed to him to be full of a tender mockery; but when she answered her voice was trembling. 'Oh, it is wonderful to be loved. . . .' She spoke dreamily, as if to herself. 'But one should be wonderful to deserve it. . . . To be loved one ought to be above all change. One ought to be perfect in body and spirit. One ought to exist but for love alone – no matter how short the time. One should be perfect – and then one should die.'

She laughed a little after saying this, and presently he saw that tears were shining in her eyes. While they stood thus together with his arms about her, time no longer existed for them. It was only when the increasing stir of morning broke in upon their ears that they remembered where they were or how they had come to be there.

After watching her go back along the path to the house Hari stood for a long while in a daze. The two butterflies were still tumbling about over the lily-pond, the shadows across the path seemed to be almost the same; but Gokal probably was beginning to wonder what had become of him.

For the rest of that day he felt himself strangely disconnected from all his past, and many days went by before he recovered from bewilderment at what had happened. He understood better now the character of the sudden change that sometimes overtook people, making a saint out of a sinner, or turning a modest woman into a wanton. When he asked himself whether his present disposition was likely to be enduring he could not see the smallest shadow of doubt. Time might work its changes upon the substance of his love, but that love was firmly rooted, and he would carry it,

for good or ill, down to the grave. So incontestable did this appear in his own mind that he was quite unreasonably surprised not to find the same confidence in Sita. That misgivings had overtaken her became evident in their next meeting. Starting out together from the garden gate, they climbed a little hill at the back of the house and sat down under a solitary pine. It was not until then that Hari noticed that beneath the glow of her happiness there was a deep disquiet. At first she was abstracted and would hardly speak, but after a while she said: 'I have been thinking about Amar . . . and not only of him but of myself. Hari, I am trying as hard as I can not to love you in a human way, only to think of you as something outside ordinary life. You won't think this cold and cowardly, will you? I want what one can get only in dreams. If life is not a dream, it ought to become one. It is like a dream to me that you should love me. What joy it gives me! But now I ask you this: Why should you, who have had many human loves, want just another one? Why not leave this in its own world? You won't think ill of me, will you? But I know how I should want to go deeper and deeper into the heart of things. And then – all the doubt! All the pain! Fresh pain at every turn. . . . Amar tells me that I am an extremist, and that is true. So love must remain a dream for me. In dreams one can give everything – be everything – but ordinary life is not made for that.'

Hari was very little troubled by these words. His happiness in the present was so great that he made no demand upon the future. To be with her, or even to be aware that she existed, seemed to be enough. He took little account of her fears, and although he



succeeded in allaying them temporarily, in the intervals between meetings they would spring up again.

'This still seems so strange to me,' she would say, 'half unreal. . . . And yet if I found it unreal I could never be proud again, I could never believe again that my world was true.' Often she fixed upon him a gaze of troubled intensity. 'I wonder if you can understand? It is dreadfully important to me. You must not break the course of my life with something that is not deep. I could not bear it. It may sound foolish, but my world is very precious to me. You are seeking to break into it. You have broken into it. And now . . .'

When she spoke in this fashion Hari would look anxiously into his heart, but still he could find nothing to shake his self-confidence. Calling Lalita back into mind, so dissimilar did that experience and this seem to him that no points emerged even for comparison. And it was the same when he looked further back. What did puzzle him at this time was his complete change of feeling as regards Amar. His former scruples had entirely vanished; but he could not manufacture scruples to order, so he shrugged, and without probing very deeply into the matter, told himself that his conscience was exceedingly erratic.

At this time the only shadow upon Hari's happiness was that cast by the figure of Gokal. It was becoming more obvious every day that he was not making a good recovery, and Hari anxiously debated whether the cause was primarily physical or mental. The news that Gunevati was probably in the hands of Salim had affected him very strongly; during the conversation his face had alternately flushed and turned pale, his manner had become more and more agitated, and in the end he had fallen into a strained silence. Hari perceived that he was in the grip of jealousy; and after this, the subject was left alone. It lay between them, occupying their thoughts but offering no aspect upon which anything could be said.

And it was the same with the subject of Sita. Gokal had begun to speak, but desisted almost at once on perceiving that his warning came too late. His mute sadness made Hari look into his heart again, but still his conscience remained without voice. What had happened was fated, a thing beyond cavil or repining. As regards Amar, both he and Sita were fully as anxious as Gokal that he should not carry away with him into his retreat preoccupations that would hinder his progress; and it was for this reason principally that they were determined to keep their love secret. For the rest, the immediate effect of the happiness in which they lived was to make everything outside their love seem

insignificant. In the course of their talks together Hari gave a brief account of his quarrel with Daniyal and of the development of his relations with Mabun at Agra. But all that seemed very far away; he could not give it much importance, and it suited him very well that Sita should take his story in the same spirit. All she asked was that he should not make any important decisions without her knowledge. She felt confident that when it came to the point he would be unable to bring himself to lie to Akbar. Her own loyalty to the Emperor was unshakable, and it led her into tirades against Mabun, whom Hari laughingly defended as one of the cleverest and most single-minded men in the Empire, and a loyal friend as well. This he really believed, although he felt tolerably certain that Mabun would sacrifice him should his purpose require it. 'Mabun,' he insisted, 'is a man of feeling. He rises above his own particular temperament. Never would he display a contempt for religion, parade cynicism, or even indulge in irony.'

Endless were their talks together during these days. Sita's alarms were gradually quieting down, and the happiness she embraced rested on a gathering confidence that Hari's love would endure. But did she imagine that he would remain content forever with the position as it now stood? Would she, indeed, have been quite content herself, had she truly believed that his passion was so easily satisfied? No doubt it pleased her to remonstrate with him over even a kiss, but there was that in her manner which seemed to say: 'And yet I should be disappointed, I confess, if you had no wish to kiss me. Were that the case, our love might become dull to you; it might even become a little dull to me . . .

On the other hand, if you could kiss me without protest, might that not become dull too?’

For a time Hari submitted to these conditions without vexation and even when he began to suffer from them he made little attempt to break them down. Nevertheless, one day he felt impelled to speak bluntly. ‘How long,’ he asked, ‘do you imagine that you can go on playing with love?’

‘Am I playing with love?’ she asked thoughtfully, then added: ‘Yes, I suppose I am.’

He said nothing more on that occasion, but his inward disquiet increased. If she, on her side, was now certain of him, could he be so certain of her? She could not be happy without the assurance that his love was serious, and yet she had the wish to make a light thing of it. That was because she was ashamed of taking real love without giving everything in return. She wanted to give her love, and yet she wanted to withhold it. How long was this contradictory humour to be indulged?

When next they met, his manner was as gentle and smiling as ever, but she was not slow to detect a touch of grimness beneath. They were sitting in the woods that went up behind the house, and it was she who first broke the silence that presently fell between them.

‘I can see that you are angry with me,’ she murmured, ‘and I also know why.’

Hari kept his eyes fixed upon the distance, and in a moment she went on: ‘You make me feel it wrong to be as I am. You make me feel mean-spirited. And yet – can’t you leave me outside the world, outside ordinary life? Couldn’t you take me more lightly?’

Couldn't you - ' she hesitated - 'couldn't you play with love - instead of letting it be a sad, craving thing?'

Although he now turned and looked at her steadily, she could not make out what was behind his eyes. She grew more troubled. She hesitated again; and at last, as if in answer to the words that he would not speak— 'Surely,' she said, 'the heart and mind of man, divine and deep, are always unappeasable?' And in a lower voice still she added: 'Whatever I gave it would never really meet your need.'

In the secret depths of his being Hari was shaken. Was it true, what she said? Was it better thus? Was fulfilment always imperfect?

On that occasion again the subject was broken off, the issue left undecided. For an hour afterwards Hari mused in solitude, and later in the evening, sitting beside the lake, he continued his reverie in the company of Gokal, who was plunged in silence too. When next he raised his eyes the moon was up, and his gaze dwelt for a moment upon his companion's unconscious face. 'Gokal,' he said, 'I have been thinking for some time that I ought to visit Khanjo.' And he went on to explain that although he had written to Mabun to inform him of Gunevati's disappearance, his report had, perforce, been very scrappy. He felt he owed it to Mabun to make some personal investigations on the spot. The whole journey, he supposed, would take little more than a week.

For a minute after he had spoken Gokal looked startled; then he seized upon the idea with an eagerness that caused Hari some secret astonishment. It looked as though Gokal were not yet resigned, or had, at any rate, allowed the elements of mystery in Gunevati's

disappearance to take an undue hold upon his imagination.

Was it by design that Hari set out upon this journey without having any further talk with Sita in private? Perhaps he himself could hardly have given a definite answer. Regarded simply as a piece of strategy the move was not remarkable for artfulness; nevertheless, the abrupt manner of his departure disquieted Sita – it disquieted her, although she could not help suspecting that it was intended to have just this effect.

His second day's travel brought him to the hermit's cave under the cliff. It was situated at the top of a rough slide of rocks, the cave mouth making a black hole in the face of the precipice that towered on above. The evening sun was shining upon that great wall of stone and the hermit himself was visible as a small, naked figure against the darkness of his lair. From the road below Hari gazed up and debated within himself; it would be a hot and dusty climb; but he was curious, and the fact that the man was a Sakti no longer discouraged him. As he scrambled up amongst the tumbled boulders he hoped devoutly that the hermit would not retire into the cavern at his approach, as such men often did. It was a relief, upon reaching the stone platform, to find him still there; and he made haste to salute him with every sign of veneration, taking the dust from his feet in the approved manner. The hermit, seated crosslegged upon the ground, looked down at this somewhat ironically. He was small and wizened, and had the air of being prematurely aged. After bidding his visitor be seated, he waited, examining him with watchful, beady eyes, the pupils of which were jet black and the whites strangely yellow. There

was a striking contrast between the mean appearance of the recluse and the grandeur of the scene about him. From this high place one looked down the full length of the great, empty valley. At its end the sun was sinking after a day's travel through a burning sky. Glorious was the emptiness beneath, falling westward into the haze of the evening's fullest glow. And in that ocean of sunlight, washing the steepness of the cliff, soaring eagles, like flecks of gold, hung or plunged, and in their descent snatched an invisible prey.

'Why have you come?' asked the hermit.

Hari hesitated. 'To hear whatever you may vouchsafe to say.'

The hermit smiled. 'I am a Sakti of three bars,' – he pointed to the mark on his forehead – 'and when men come to me it is to talk of love.'

'So it be!' replied Hari. 'Of love, then, we will speak.'

'Love,' said the hermit with a sneer, 'is the chief of the fictitious values of Prakriti or Nature. A man assigns value to the beloved and to her love; he also assigns value to his own. Thus he gives himself and his concerns an imaginary importance and flatters his self-esteem.'

Hari nodded gravely, making an effort to conceal the antipathy with which the hermit inspired him. After some reflection he said: 'You are speaking of the love between a man and a woman, but there is also brotherly love and the love of man for the Divine.'

The hermit opened his mouth in a silent laugh. 'What I have said applies to all love. Behind love is the craving for self-aggrandisement. Man has invented

God and deified love in order to give himself greater importance – at any rate in his own eyes.’

‘If man is the measure of all things,’ said Hari, ‘then he is as great as he believes himself to be.’

‘Unfortunately,’ returned the hermit, again smiling his unpleasant smile, ‘he cannot believe himself to be great on his own merits. He is always driven to relate himself to the Divine.’

Hari was silent, and for a minute or more his attention was distracted from his companion. The golden haze had deepened; the crags, the precipices, the darkly-wooded slopes melted away from deepest blue beneath him into filmy transparencies above. Only this cliff and this small rock platform upon which he and his companion were seated glowed still as if in the heart of a furnace, the sun’s heat and brilliance still striking there.

Then, as he was still gazing down the valley, he became aware that the hermit was studying him, and he turned to meet those eyes that held a crafty gleam.

‘What is your scheme of things?’ he inquired, again looking away.

‘The world,’ said the hermit, ‘is ruled by a number of irrational forces, which constitute Prakriti; and we, ourselves, *are* Prakriti. The external world is not mirrored by us, passively, in our sense-perceptions, but created as a magic lantern creates the images that it projects.’

‘I have been taught,’ said Hari, ‘that Prakriti is identical with Maya, the principle of finitude or delusion.’

‘How can that be called delusive which alone exists? The Infinite, the Absolute, the Real – call it what you will – transcends the categories of existence and non-



existence. For us, therefore, it is not and never will be. Finitude is essential to existence, and we are finite centres creating the world.'

'And we create love as part of the world,' said Hari, 'yet you began by discriminating against love.'

At this the hermit gave Hari an evil look, but after a moment he said: 'I did not deny the existence of love. I denied the legitimacy of the value attached to it.'

'But your philosophy provides no criterion by which to judge values or even to distinguish between truth and error.'

'And what philosophy does more?' The hermit's evil look had returned, but presently it faded into a weary mockery. 'Underlying all philosophies are a set of beliefs that can neither be justified nor rejected; the instinct to philosophize is but one of the minor activities of Prakriti; no philosophy is anything more than an index to the character of its exponent.'

As he spoke these last words he was again smiling, and it appeared to Hari, although he could hardly believe his eyes, that the man actually gave him a wink. For a minute or more nothing was said. Hari was thrown into bewilderment. Was the man really as petty as he seemed? Or did the very enormity of his pettiness redeem him? So dazzling was the yellow radiance in which they were now both enveloped that it contributed not a little to his mental confusion; so majestic was the great bowl of the valley filled with a swirling haze of fire that he could only blink and wonder. When he glanced at the hermit it was to encounter the same watchful smile; and the miserable thinness of the man and the weariness that was reflected

in his yellow eyes filled his heart with pity. But it would never do, he felt, to let this appear.

Assuming, therefore, an air of discomfiture, he rose slowly to his feet. 'Your thought is beyond me,' he muttered. 'I must confess that I am no philosopher.' There was an awkward pause during which he kept his eyes fixed upon the ground. Then with an abrupt farewell salutation he took himself off down the slope. The hermit had not ceased to smile, but the scorn in his smile seemed slightly forced, and Hari had the uncomfortable feeling that perhaps his pity had not been successfully concealed. On the other hand, it was possible that he was doing the hermit an injustice. It was possible that the hermit saw everything, including the meanness of his own character, and was sufficiently detached not to care. Was that what the hermit's wink had meant? Was his essential ego so far withdrawn that it took no greater interest in the meanness of the man who happened to be himself than in the meanness of any other?

This state of mind – and he knew it to be not uncommon – perplexed Hari as he considered it. Was character, personality, everything? or was it nothing? In many ways he agreed with the hermit; but he would have liked to go further and to believe that the truth was conditioned by character no less than by sense-perceptions. He would also, however, have liked to think that no human being would ever accept any system of belief that was not in harmony with such feelings as those, for instance, just inspired in him by the setting sun. In a properly appointed universe there should be a God with an absolute standard by which human standards were to be judged. If value lay at

the heart of things, then objective truth—as reason attempted to frame it—could offer at best but an unimportant aspect of the whole. Realists were apt to disparage value as an all-too-human concept. They were apt to believe that the reason could dehumanize itself; and then they would prostrate themselves before it with the most abject religiosity. Unfortunately, of all human attributes the most obviously all-too-human was discursive reason itself. For reason was the instrument of man's conscious purposes, and these were the instrument of his unconscious purposes, and these again were but a small part of the activity of Nature or God. Was that activity purposeful, too? Analogy, a poor guide perhaps, but our only one, would say yes.

Having brought these reflections to a comfortable conclusion, he allowed his thoughts to fly back to Sita, and with Sita they remained during the whole of the rest of his journey. The haze of his preoccupations dimmed even his first hours at Khanjo. Upon the little lawn, where he and Sita had once sat together, he stood in a trance, staring down at the red and brown carpet of fallen rhododendron blossoms that now covered it over. It was very silent here in the wilderness of trees; indeed, the whole place was wrapped in a silence which he felt to be slightly uncanny. All the servants excepting those of the lowest caste had gone; and these, in addition to their usual air of apathy, seemed to him to wear a furtive look. Dusk fell while he sat in the verandah of Gokal's house trying to fix his mind upon the business before him.

It was early next morning when he walked across the yard and threw open Gunevati's room, which

had been kept locked since Sita's visit to it. The windows were closed; the sun beating on the roof had heated the air inside, which was heavy and heavily charged with scent. His search took him some time, for he went over every inch of the room. When he had finished he was in a sweat and threw himself down on the bed, yielding to an unaccountable exhaustion. So vividly had this scent and all these intimate belongings brought the girl before his eyes that her actual physical absence was like a kind of self-contradiction in nature. She was here and yet she was not here; and his heart seemed to ache for her. But perhaps it was for Sita that his heart really was aching? or perhaps it was out of sympathy for Gokal? In any case, he was in the grip of a new and overwhelming compassion. 'Did Gokal come into this room? Did he see those dresses lying about and smell this familiar perfume? Alas!' he cried out within himself, 'what hideous pain!' And after this there came the thought: 'Shall I ever stand bereft of Sita?'

As he lay there with closed eyes he was gradually overcome with shame at his earlier lack of imagination. Within what narrow limits his self-absorption had confined him! His perceptions, his intuitions, his understanding – how much further they might have gone! The extent of his negligence revealed itself to him now. The longer he stared into the past the darker and deeper became the vistas of his speculation.

Two hours passed by before he got up and prepared to leave the room. The only objects of any interest that he had found were a few scraps of paper inscribed with charms; and these were only interesting in that they raised the question: Whose hand was it that had

penned them? Gunevati herself was, of course, illiterate; the script had a degree of refinement that put the village scribe out of consideration; and the handwriting was certainly not Gokal's. Following an idea that had come to him in the course of his musings he took the path across the valley to Amar's house. Before the door there squatted two or three wretched-looking women who watched him without even turning their heads. Again it entered his mind that they had a secret, and he was glad that he had thought of sending two of his men on ahead. He had selected two lent to him by Mabun and had given them instructions to enter the valley from the other direction in the guise of pilgrims on their way to the Banassi shrine. These men were to mix with the people of the place and pick up all they could. But he was now afraid that they would not find out much, for his own arrival so soon after was evidently putting the people on their guard. No doubt they had jumped to the conclusion that Gokal had succumbed to the poison given him and that his friend had come determined to wreak vengeance upon someone at any cost.

After wandering round and about the house, he found what he was looking for: the place where the rubbish had been thrown. It had occurred to him that some relic of Jali's lesson-hours should surely be discoverable, and his object was to compare Jali's handwriting with that of the Tantric charms. It was not long before he succeeded in unearthing a page of manuscript, some verses from the Septuagint translated into Persian. This exercise could only be Jali's, and he saw at a glance that his conjecture had been correct.

It was in an even more pensive mood that he went back across the valley, and for the rest of the day he sat in meditation in the verandah of Gokal's house. Had there been any doubt in his mind as to what this association between Gunevati and Jali implied, it would have been dispelled by the gross obscenity of many of the Mantras – especially those designed to capture a man's love. And to think that this had been going on under his eyes week after week! What blindness! What stupid incuriosity regarding other people's thoughts and feelings! He recalled his night meeting with Jali in the corridor of the Agra Palace and was filled with contrition at having neglected ever to give the boy more than a passing thought since that day. He had known very well that Jali must be leading an intense inward life, and yet he had never troubled himself to think about it. Had his sympathies been a little more alive, many things might have turned out differently. . . .

The silence and solitude of the place were filled with vanished presences, and his musings took their colour from the deep-hued forest that spread its cloak over every fold of the ground. One day followed another, and his sojourn at Khanjo was drawing itself out much longer than he had expected; but he could not permit himself to leave until he had talked with the herb-woman who had attended Gokal; and she was away gathering roots on the high hills. A hope that he might obtain some fresh light upon the nature of Gokal's poisoning had really held the first place in his mind from the outset.

It seemed to Sita that she had begun to love Hari on that misty, rainy day two months ago, when he and Amar had ridden away from Khanjo. But her love, she supposed, would have lain dormant for ever had Hari not returned and made a call upon it.

One could not know oneself. Although she had sometimes felt that it might happen to her to fall deeply in love, now that the thing had come to pass she was confounded. Could somebody else have foreseen her future better than she? Ambissa, for instance? Even in the old days Ambissa had shaken her head when she saw that the duties of a wife and mother had not absorbed all her sister-in-law's energies. Ambissa, on her visits, had extolled the selfless Hindoo women (whom she resembled little enough herself) and had deprecated her taking so lively a part in the social and intellectual life of Amar's court. And there had been other women, too, who, being inclined to light conduct, interpreted her freedom of spirit in their own fashion. Well, they could now say they had been right; but the world's way of being right was such a shallow way! The world was incapable of understanding what was in her heart now; and in those old days she had been blameless indeed.

Thinking of Jali, she was glad, instead of sorry, that he was spiritually so detached. He loved her no doubt,

but she could see that her ways of thought and feeling affected him as strange; and, although he was lonely, he seemed to cherish his loneliness with passion. Once when she was teaching him her religion, he looked at her gravely and said: 'Yes, you create Christ; but I create devils.' Jali did not need her, she now said to herself with mingled sadness and relief, neither did Amar. And then she wondered again whether all that had happened could possibly have been foreseen or averted. Not that she wished that it had been averted; she preferred to love, even if loving meant suffering.

The last time, when Hari had ridden away, it had been quite different. She had let him go then without any anxiety. Perhaps she had felt sure that he was taking with him memories that he would be unable to cast off. At any rate, the thought of him had been a warm, steady glow at the back of her heart, making her feel life to be rich and deep. That season had been like the spring, a season of promise and expectation. She had been without her present sense of self-committal, of unsafety, of a hunger for a happiness that might easily be snatched away. Now, with each day of Hari's absence, her uneasiness increased. As the warmth of his presence faded, loneliness and misgiving took possession of her heart. She was living with intensity, but that intensity was painful. Hari was the ghostly companion of her solitary walks, and passionately did she argue and plead with him. 'Do not mistake me!' she cried out in her heart. 'Do not imagine that I was born to be a nun. No, I am alive to all sides of love. But, although I need you, I also need to wander in the lands of my own mind - solitary and free. I do not



want to be your captive . . . although it could be – it would be – wonderful. You – who are free, too, really – you must let me be free. Don't draw me into any depths however sweet. . . . For I should not be able to emerge whole again; and you – perhaps you would!

The more deeply and irretrievably she felt her heart to be engaged, the more poignant became the terror lest he should one day fail her. She said to herself that if she could be sure of dying at once she would accept her present risks with a light heart. But one did not die: that was the horror of it. One lived to see the world turn into a waste. And with the memory of the magical world of yesterday, one moved, stiff and frozen, under the cold light of ordinary days; only they were not ordinary days now, but days of agony. 'I could not face it!' she said to her invisible companion. 'For, you see, my dreams and imaginings would have gone too! They would have been lost to me – perhaps for ever.'

Sunk in a deep abstraction she would walk, swift and unseeing, for many miles through the dark woods, and then, stopping suddenly, look round like one aroused from sleep. Her being was saturated with the spirit of the forest through which she had come – the moist, peaty earth, the solemn pools of brown water, the trees with grey lichen hanging down. She would look up at the tall pines standing quiet around her – very quiet, as if concentrated upon their silent growth. She felt the strength of those age-long, patient lives, and throwing herself down and pressing her fingers into the loose, cool mould, she lost the outer trappings of personality altogether; she was no longer the young

Ranee, nor the wife, nor the mother, nor even the woman who loved. She lost herself completely; she was no longer anything but an emotion, so still, so profound, that there was no name by which it could be described.

Two weeks and more went by, and Hari's return was overdue. She began to lose her sleep and she found it harder and harder to rouse herself from long daydreams that were full of pain. Again and again she reconstructed their talks together, and in each one of his words she read a dire meaning, in each one of his silences she found an implication that froze her heart. No doubt he was angry; he was disappointed; he felt that his love had been misprized.

And then, yet once again, she would look into herself and search. Was she really divided in spirit? Was she timid, ungenerous, lukewarm? A good Christian she was not (might God forgive her!) but was she not even a woman capable of love? Why had she not been able to yield to love in all simplicity? Why could she not accept that inspiration and live in it unafraid? She thought of Christ, and so closely was her religion interwoven with the tissue of her life that she could not now tear the two apart and isolate a moral code by which to judge herself. How could it be wrong – indeed, it could not be wrong – to love? How could it be wrong to do that which was so joyful – and which gave one so much pain?

But what of Hari, as day after day still went by? What could have happened? Was he ill? Was he dead?

And then, to bring her distress to its climax, she was pierced by pangs of jealous suspicion. It came into her

mind that Hari might have met with Lalita once again. Was it not possible that his love for that girl had never really died, that the old passion was ready to leap up into flame? These thoughts came to her one night as she lay sleepless; and bitterly did she regret not having made more sure at the very first. She ought to have studied him more closely; she should have been able to read his heart more clearly than he could himself. The torment of these thoughts drove her from her bed; she threw open the shutters and sat by the window in the bright moonlight. Ah, now, she thought, it was too late, too late! And yet what beauty still adorned the world! What peace in that dark night-sky! A gleam of silver shone from the lake where the setting moon just fell upon it. Owls were hooting from far away in the trees behind the house. She remembered how often she had sat beside her window like this in old days, and what a cool, fresh happiness had then been hers, how smoothly her spirit had slid out into the night. All that was over now. The beauty and the peace were remote from her. So bitter was the contrast that a flame of anger leapt up in her heart. It was Hari, not she, who was answerable. Hari's were the blame and the shame! All that she had ever meant to give him was friendship; had she not resisted every step upon the fatal road leading to this?

But her anger flickered out very quickly, and for a space she laid her head on her arms. Then, getting up, and moving with great quietness – for Amar was asleep in the next room – she lit a candle and sat down to write. The trembling of her hand almost prevented her. 'Will you tell me why you stay away, and why

you went away without saying a word to me? I was happy before and now I am unhappy. I am frightened – because I did trust you and let myself depend on you. I found in life an added richness and loveliness, but now I feel that life is perhaps going to give me the lie. But it cannot be you who would do this to me? And yet – you went away without speaking a word. I think of the times when I said that I was afraid of becoming dependent on you, and you answered that you would never fail me. But perhaps I am being foolish. . . . I know that I am liable to fall into panics – thinking of change and chance and time that waste this fleeting, transitory world. And the stars, they terrify me. Love is the only fire at which we can warm ourselves when the great spaces look down on us, and the empty coldness of them settles upon us. Up here, under the huge, snowy mountains, I feel remote from the ordinary kindlinesses of life. Yesterday I walked to the edge of the valley and looked down into the pearly distance towards the plains, and I thought that nothing could match the loveliness of the earth except an exquisite love in the hearts of men. But the thought of you was mixed with a dreadful fear. When shall I see you again? Perhaps you are staying away because you wished me to be lonely and to make this appeal? But that thought frightens me too. Must love be like that – instead of confidence and peace? I only know that I am not used to such suffering, and that not long ago I put all my trust in you.'

This written, she closed her eyes and sat still. She felt more tranquil. It would not be difficult to send the letter off secretly the next day. Having

hidden it under her pillow, she sank into an exhausted sleep.

When morning came the letter was hidden again, this time in her dress, and she carried it about with her all day. She could not bring herself to send it. There was a thought in her mind that gave her the calm of resignation. She knew that if the worst was true, no letter, no appeal, would be of any avail. One had to wait in silence – if need be, for ever. One had to take one's suffering in secret.

All the morning she sat before the house with a white face and her hands folded in her lap. Would it be possible to retire from the world, she wondered – to become a nun? And, thinking of St. Theresa and Lady Julian, 'Oh! what joy it would give me,' she cried out in her heart, 'what joy, if I could follow in their path!'

Later she went out for another solitary walk. It was a dusky afternoon and the air was gentle and warm. For miles round there was nothing to be heard but the uneven sighing of the wind. She went through a belt of forest, and at its further edge a flock of pigeons were flying in and out of the trees. For a long time she stood watching their quick, strong flight. They seemed unable to make up their minds, but at last they took wing and did not return. Straight on through the wet sky they went, and disappeared into a rainy distance.

She loitered for a while on the outskirts of the wood; sometimes brushing through the damp bushes, sometimes leaning against the trunk of a tree. The wind was coming up from over the hills opposite, with clouds and gloom in its wake. The idea came to her

that Hari might be travelling along under that obscurity and she longed to warm her heart with this fancy on the way home; but she resisted; and later she was glad, for when she reached the house Hari had not yet arrived.

HARI's last days at Khanjo were spent in a fever of unrest, and his impatience to rejoin Sita was exasperated by a failure to make any good use of his time. The herb-woman, when at last she returned, assured him that Gokal had been poisoned by fungi alone, but he could not help doubting her. There was nothing to be done beyond giving her money; but not even for money was she likely to incriminate herself; and if, as he suspected, the fungi had been used to conceal another poison which she herself had supplied, nothing, not even the most earnest assurances of pardon and immunity from punishment, would make her confess it. Some people would have ordered that she should be tortured, but that went against his nature. So it might well be that the issue whether Gokal was to live or die lay in the decision of this cynical old woman; but nothing that he could say or do would influence her.

In elucidating the mystery of Gunevati's flight he was scarcely more successful. His men got some evidence that a party of strangers had arrived in the district a few days before the girl's disappearance; and the reluctance shown by everybody to say anything about those strangers made one suspect that they had been persons with full power to intimidate. The people of the district, however, were so base-born that it was unnecessary, perhaps, to look for any reasoned

cause for their sullen secretiveness; or possibly they were nervous about the recent murder of a young man from a neighbouring village. Gunevati, it appeared, was indirectly responsible, and for some unknown reason the villagers seemed extremely anxious that the murder should not be investigated. Hari would never have heard of it but for the herb-woman, who evidently thought it only fair to make some return for all the money she had been given. She showed him the place where, according to her, the young man (who had been Gunevati's lover) was buried. There certainly were some suspicious marks upon the ground. The soil was cracked, having swollen up in a blister, and this seemed to indicate that the work was not the work of Thugs, for Thugs always drove a stake through the body to allow the gasses of decomposition to escape without a sign. Nevertheless, there was good cause to believe that many of the men in the village were Thugs; at any rate, as the herb-woman significantly observed, they had very quickly established relations with Gunevati, in whom they had without doubt recognized one of Kali's secret devotees. To sum up, the scraps of information obtained were merely confusing; all they revealed was that evil things had been taking place. Hari left Khanjo with thankfulness, determined to forget it as soon as he could, for that little valley held secrets that he could not hope ever to penetrate.

After putting the forest behind him he was able to ride fast, and he certainly made the most of his opportunities. What would he not have given to know whether his prolonged absence had caused Sita a single moment's unrest or anxiety! He could very easily believe



that she had remained perfectly serene. He could see her dividing her days between the old Rajah, Gokal, and Jali. She would have listened to the old Rajah's maunderings with delightful patience; she would have played chess with Gokal; she would have gone boating on the lake with Jali; and thus her days would have sped peacefully by. Well! if she had really been like that, what was he to make of it? How could he escape the conclusion that her feelings for him were very different from his for her? Had any woman, who was herself in love, ever before begged her lover to take his love lightly? Ah, no! he said in sudden agony. And her attitude to him during all their days together, was it not consistent with the theory that she was simply a romantic, a little in love with Love – nothing more! With these thoughts obsessing him, Hari rode fast, indeed; but he could not outride his doubts and misgivings which deepened every hour.

The shadows of the alders were drawing out over the meadows as he urged his tired horse along the last mile. He had a foolish hope that he might come upon Sita sitting beside the lake path, and as he dismounted before the old Rajah's house he gazed up at the windows with the same causeless expectation. It was thus that Amar found him, and there by the gate they stood for a while, before he went on to his tent, but not without having accepted an invitation to come in later on. During the interval he had no thought but this: 'I shall know how I stand the first moment I set eyes upon her.' In his mind the idea had become firmly fixed that this meeting would reveal the turn of his fate. Her face, her attitude, the manner of her greeting – he trembled

in anticipation; and it was with a still more profound inward tremor that he entered the room. The sun had set not long ago, and the whole party were seated by the window that looked upon the lake. A soft twilight, reflected up from the water, mingled with the yellow shine of the lamps that had just been lit. Some game was being played in which everyone took a part; Sita's laughter was ringing out as he came forward, and it seemed to him in that instant that he was looking upon an ideally happy and contented family group. His eyes sought Sita's, but he could not capture her regard; even as she rose to give him her hand she was still laughing; it was impossible to believe that she had lost her peace of mind for a single moment.

The next few minutes were the most painful in the whole of Hari's life. Again and again he searched Sita's face; it was serene and gay; she seemed not to notice the anguished looks which – regardless of the others – he could not refrain from fastening upon her. Either she was too indifferent to observe them or she was pretending not to, and he did not know which supposition was the worst.

Very well then! The blow had fallen, and all that mattered for the moment was to keep up appearances. Taking himself sternly under control, he directed his conversation to everyone in turn and abstained from looking at Sita except when actually addressing her. Every moment of that dreadful visit confirmed his first impression, and as soon as he could he brought the ordeal to an end.

Not for one instant did it enter his imagination that the whole fabric of his hopes and fears had been spun

out of nothing at all. The simple truth was that his return had swept Sita's misery out of existence in one instant. From one of the windows she had seen him approach; she had overheard his conversation with Amar; she had noted the strain in his eyes, the anxiety in his voice; and then she had rushed to her room to give way to tears. Happiness had come back to her, a happiness tired and tremulous at first, but afterwards triumphant. Once again she could enter into Jali's games with spirit, once again she could offer to those about her an appearance that was not odiously and miserably deceptive. 'He loves me!' she cried out within her heart, 'And if he does not love me enough, I can make him love me more.' From the moment she had seen him coming she had known that she would give herself to him wholly. The struggle was over; her conscience troubled her no longer. So great was this relief from inward conflict that she went about the house singing and laughing to herself.

During the whole of Hari's visit she was divided between amusement and compassion. Not all, but a little, of what was passing in his mind she was able to guess. 'Ah, when I undeceive him!' she thought to herself, and the knowledge of the joy she could give doubled her own.

It was in a condition of dreadful calm that Hari walked back to his tent. 'No doubt I deserve this!' he said to himself, and from that thought he endeavoured to extract comfort. Sita had discovered that her heart was, in reality, bound to her husband and child. Could he blame her, if a woman's instinct to colour her life with romance had carried her for a few steps off her

true road? Oh, but it was not kind of her to have acted like this! She should have set a watch upon the path from Khanjo and let a messenger intercept him with a letter. She should have spared him this meeting. But how should she – not being ensnared by passion herself – how should she conceive what he was feeling? To understand madness one must oneself be mad.

Presently he got up and stood at the entrance of his tent. A few faint stars behind the clouds gave great profundity to the sky; but the human misery within the insignificant compass of a man's mind could be, he thought, as deep. Yet when he looked back into the tent again and when his eye fell on two or three withered flowers that Sita had once given him: 'A little earthly happiness,' he thought, 'is what man craves. Give him that, poor wretch, and the stars may all go out.'

A small light shining through the darkness marked Gokal's tent and told him that its occupant was still awake. He hesitated, feeling that if he joined Gokal it should be with the object of bestowing sympathy rather than of seeking it. Poor Gokal's unrest had been aggravated instead of assuaged by the brief account already given him of the investigations at Khanjo.

While he was still undecided, the light from Gokal's tent was obscured, but a few moments later he observed that there was still a faint glow coming through the canvas. This showed that the tent door had been closed; and he could not help asking himself what that meant, for Gokal was accustomed to leave his door open all night. After a few moments he stepped quietly

through the darkness towards the closed tent. The canvas was everywhere fastened up, but in a minute he found a chink to which he put his eye. Without any shame, and with a good deal more curiosity than he could account for, he set himself to spy into the tent. Nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary. Gokal was sitting on his couch staring down at something beside him; his face was turned away, but before very long he seemed to catch some sound, for he lifted his head and looked all round about. It was a long, searching look that had something furtive about it; it gave Hari the impression that he was meditating an act that he felt must on no account be overseen. For a moment, fearful of detection, Hari drew his head back; but his heart had begun to beat with a vague, painful anxiety, and after a minute he stooped again to his chink. Gokal's face was now wholly visible, and to Hari's horror, his expression was almost that of an idiot. His eyes were staring widely, unseeingly; his chin had dropped; there was no intelligence, but a terrible, remote concentration of thought depicted on his face.

Hari felt his limbs beginning to tremble; he straightened himself and after a few moments of desperate hesitancy moved quietly away to a distance of several yards from the tent. Then he turned and walked back again, this time making as much noise as possible. 'Still awake?' he cried, and pushed at the flap which was tied over the entrance.

A few moments passed before any answer came, and in the meantime he managed to get another peep into the interior. Gokal appeared to be thrusting something hurriedly away out of sight behind the couch; and his

manner, as he admitted his visitor, was awkward and confused. Hari explained that he had just come back from the old Rajah's house, and on seeing a light still burning thought he would step in for a chat. He found the greatest difficulty in giving himself a natural demeanour, for his suspicions were deepening all the time. Gokal, who had again seated himself upon the couch, averted his eyes, swallowed, and said nothing. The small oil-lamp on the table beside him was burning smokily; and it was obviously in an attempt to give himself countenance that he leant forward and made as though to trim the wick; but the shaking of his hand prevented him.

'Gokal,' said Hari, 'I am afraid you have fever to-night.'

'That may be,' the answer came huskily. And he added: 'Yes, I am feverish.'

All at once Hari put aside all pretence. Dropping down on a seat opposite, he fastened upon Gokal a gaze of profound anxiety.

'For God's sake,' he said, 'what were you doing before I came in?'

'Doing? Nothing.'

With a gesture Hari brushed this aside. 'I ask: what were you doing?'

Gokal stared at him warily and in silence.

'I was standing outside,' said Hari. 'I have been watching you for these last ten minutes. Do you understand?'

A frown of perplexity appeared upon Gokal's face.

Hari drew a deep breath and it was with throttled utterance that he said: 'Very well. But I shall not leave you. I shall remain here.'

The two men regarded one another intently, and for a while there was silence in the tent. Hari's gaze was fixed and searching, but Gokal's was unsteady, and to Hari it almost seemed as if he could see – behind the darkness of those shifting pupils – a headlong rout of thoughts. At last, however, Gokal blinked, sighed, and gently shook his head.

'Dear Hari,' he said with a transient smile, 'you are making a mistake. I am not thinking of suicide – not at this moment, no.'

At first Hari's expression hardly changed; then gradually his tensely relaxed. 'You frightened me,' he murmured. He was still scrutinizing Gokal with a painful concentration. 'And even so – there is still something you must explain – there is still something I do not understand.'

The smile on Gokal's face had been replaced by a look of agony. He struggled with himself, but the agitation that had been discernible in him from the beginning was no longer to be held down. All at once he started a sentence and then cut it short; he began a gesture and left it uncompleted; in the end, with a sort of moan, he leant backwards, he felt with his hand on the floor, and brought up some object that was lying hidden behind his couch.

'There! Do you see that? And that?' Down upon the bed he flung a muslin dress, a necklace, some silver bangles.

Bewildered, Hari bent forward and examined them. 'These were Gunevati's?' he asked hesitatingly.

'Were? You say *were*? You think, then, she is dead?'

'No, no. Why should I mean that? Why should she be dead?'

Gokal took up the piece of muslin, spread it out on the bed, and gazed at it for a full minute with a look that baffled Hari completely. But his perplexity was soon submerged by a rising tide of compassion.

‘So that is what you were hiding from me?’ he pronounced with sadness. ‘My poor Gokal, what, in God’s name, shall I say? You know as well as I do that you are in bondage. You are obsessed. You are possessed. You are mad. Have you not taken that girl’s mortal body? Have you not seen into the miserable emptiness of her mind? All that she has or is you have already made yours. What more, then, do you desire? What is it possible to obtain? Companionship, affection, love – they are not in her to give. You know all this. You know your madness. You know . . .’

He stopped. Gokal was neither listening nor pretending to listen; he had a look of agonized intensity; his eyes rolled as if he were seeking some way of escape from the turmoil of his own brain.

‘Do you *wish* she were dead?’ Hari asked suddenly.

Gokal said: ‘I think she is dead.’

‘Why?’

There was a pause. Gokal’s manner was now so odd that Hari began to fear for his reason.

‘Those,’ – and Gokal pointed – ‘those were the things she was actually wearing when she ran away.’

‘But,’ stammered Hari, ‘but how, in that case . . .’

‘Someone thrust those things into my tent – just now – in the darkness – about an hour ago.’

‘How can that be? You are making some mistake.



Gokal, you know, you have fever. . . . You have imagined - '

Gokal lifted his arms to heaven and groaned. 'No, I am not mad. Someone is mocking me! Someone is mocking me with her death!' And he covered his face with his hands.

It was about two hours later that Hari stepped out of Gokal's tent. The night was dark with a warm, fitful breeze that blew into his face as he stumbled over the rough grass. The light in his own tent had gone out; on all sides it was dark.

In his long talk with Gokal something had very soon emerged. No sooner had he recovered from the first shock of his stupefaction than his mind was illuminated by the spark of a definite surmise. He let it develop for a while without saying anything, but presently, as the light waxed and would not be quenched, he made a disclosure of his thought.

So far, in his account of his doings at Khanjo, he had omitted all reference to Jali. The boy's association with Gunevati was a matter, as he well knew, that Gokal would take very deeply to heart. Poor Gokal would stare aghast at the picture of the evil that he was responsible for. The various sidelights thrown upon Gunevati's life at Khanjo extended – but did not, alas! delimit – the dark field of his accountability. They would increase his dismay.

And yet the whole revelation had to be made, for it formed the basis of Hari's present conjecture, which was that the perpetrator of this odious trick was Jali himself. True, he had no theory to explain how Jali had come by those belongings of Gunevati's, and everything behind the actual incident remained as

mysterious as before. Nevertheless, his intuition held firm; he was convinced that Jali knew a great deal more about Gunevati than either he or Gokal; and in this piece of wanton mystification he saw Jali's hand.

The pain of the stroke was intensified for Gokal by his affection for Jali and by his previous confidence that his affection was returned. Hari made haste to assure him that he need not think differently now. There was a common propensity in children to indulge in freakish acts of this nature, and it was impossible in the present case to believe that the boy had meant any harm.

Long after the ground had all been surveyed the two friends sat in a deep silent contemplation that was broken only by the murmur of an occasional thought. His new vision of the affair had lifted Gokal into another sphere of emotion. Rising above the personal and particular, he stood back, he took a broader view – a view that included all the actors of the drama in its widened scope. Hari's conjecture was enigmatical, but, should it prove to be true, a way of exploration was opened out that might well lead to the very heart of the mystery. He and Jali, thus strangely linked, would be constrained to open their minds to one another, and no doubt each would be able to give the other some light, some gift of added understanding.

After Hari had left him Gokal continued to sit upon his couch before the open doorway through which there flowed the damp night air charged with the scents of grass and sedge, and filled with a thousand rustlings and murmurings, and the creaking of boughs rubbing together in the wind. After a while a gust blew out his lamp, but instead of relighting it he rose

and seated himself outside the open door. As the warm wind blew about his limbs he felt his fever leaving him. The absence of the moon and stars made the night intimate and earthly; dry leaves, lifted from the ground, were swept across his hands and face. It seemed as if the earth's secret energies were working upon him, and he yielded to a process which he felt to be beneficent. His spirit lay still in a quiet excitement; a sense of expectation gathered; it was like that of a woman who is awaiting the first pangs of her first childbed. Little by little he lost the feeling of his body and his consciousness diffused itself over the night. 'Can this be death?' he wondered, and his answer came as a vanishing of the question's significance. The rustle of the leaves grew fainter, the darkness deepened and became absolute; at last his spirit, completely isolated, spoke to itself and said: 'I am aware only of being aware.' What now remained was a consciousness that was not Gokal's, because it knew nothing of Gokal; nor did it know anything of the world, or of time, or of space. It knew nothing but itself.

The duration of this state was immeasurable for as long as the state was changeless, but it was still without a break of consciousness that the flow of external sensation returned. He became again aware of the rustle of the wind and of time passing; then he recognized the sound of the wind for what it was. In dormancy his memories of the world returned, but long before he evoked them he was active in thought. He said to himself: 'I have had an experience of the possibility of pure self-consciousness. In that state subject and object are one; awareness reflects awareness like two mirrors placed opposite, and that unity

in duality seems to constitute self-consciousness, which is also selfhood.'

And then it seemed to him that he was explaining these things to Amar, who shook his head and said: 'The attribution of selfhood is unjustified.'

'But self-consciousness,' he replied, 'is selfhood. It is a closed circuit, finite but boundless.'

Amar shook his head again. 'Pure consciousness is consciousness of *it's* self, which is not the same thing as consciousness of one's self. Where there is no remembering personality there can be no selfhood.'

As he was considering this, Gokal's eyes began to see again and he noticed a few dim stars in the sky above the hill top. Whereupon it struck him that in the blankness of pure self-consciousness there were no stars; in fact, the whole phenomenal world remained unaccounted for. And on that there followed the conviction that pure self-consciousness was not the final state of spirit, and that his experience was only interesting as a direct personal revelation of the falseness of Amar's last statement. Pure self-consciousness, might, he considered, be a suspensory condition between rebirths. And this was what he next said, adding that no consciousness which did not comprehend in a static and perfected unity all temporal processes from the beginning to the end of time could claim absoluteness or godhead.

And again Amar frowned and replied that ideas of personality, even of consciousness, were null when applied to the Absolute. The Absolute, as Buddha constantly implied, was simply that of which nothing could be predicated.

But at this point Gokal felt himself possessed by a

keen and irrecusable sense of the reality and significance of the phenomenal world as a feature of the Absolute. 'To philosophize at all,' he said, 'is to postulate that the process in Time calls for explanation. An explanation of it must be explicit or implicit in every system of thought, whether you call it a philosophy or no.'

He would have gone on, but all at once his mind dropped to another plane; his thoughts changed, his attention was fixed upon psychological actualities. Looking into Amar's mind he saw jealousy there and suspicion and yet other shadowy forms of evil. Amar now seemed to him to be standing by the door of the tent with the light of the lamp shining upon him, and the austerity of his countenance and the rigidity of his bearing inspired Gokal with deep misgivings. He thought of Tche-Sing and another Chinese priest whom he knew, both Buddhists of a school kindred to Amar's. These two were far advanced in wisdom, and what was remarkable in their bearing was its easiness, and upon their countenances a smile that bespoke a benign suppleness of mind. A terrible doubt seized him whether Amar was not misdirecting himself entirely; and when he looked at Tche-Sing for an answer, the latter to his surprise bent down to his ear and quoted from the Christian Scriptures: 'If therefore, the light that is in him be darkness, how great is that darkness.' And again yet lower he whispered: 'Base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things that are not, to bring to nought the things that are.' Gokal's heart sank, for he knew that Amar would be unable to make anything of these words; his mind, stiffened by logic, being obtuse to the awful paradoxes of the world of spirit. Yet was it

possible that this devout seeker after truth should fail absolutely? In great anguish he cried out; 'Amar, your love for me has been one of the greatest supports of my life and for a two-fold reason. I have felt that you were able to love me for myself only *because* I was your brother in aspiration. Now consider this well, Amar, and the quality of your love shall show you a truth that has hidden itself from your intelligence. Upon what does your love rest and unto what does it address itself? You will see that it is more than human and seeks what is more than human. It rests upon an intuition that for you a man is lovable inasmuch as he partakes of the divine essence. You will see that your love addresses itself to the divine. There is no other explanation of the highest love; it has one object and one only. Such love is in you and it testifies to your unacknowledged recognition of God.'

Having spoken, Gokal waited anxiously for a reply; but for a long while Amar remained dumb; and when at last he answered there was anger in his tone. 'Is this how you would help me?' he said. 'Would you tempt me back into doubt? Love is the last of the imperfections to fade before the white radiance of Nirvana is reached. I know who has corrupted you. But, unshakable, I take my stand upon the wisdom of the Enlightened One.'

Gokal lifted his eyes to the heavens, and behold! the night-sky was ablaze with constellations that the earth had never seen before. He was filled with ineffable awe, but he knew that Amar could not share his vision, and he said:

'Where is the doctrine that is absolutely pure? And where shall a man seek truth except from the light

within? Listen to the divine Plotinus: "Let us call upon God himself, not by form of words, but by the lifting to him of the soul in prayer. And the only way to pray is to advance solitarily towards the One who is solitary."'

At this point the vehemence of his emotion roused him from his fantasies, but he continued to sit where he was; and while the day broke and the dawn brightened, his eyes still remained fixed, as if he was unaware of the passing of the night.

A little later, the camp servants, rising to their tasks, looked with surprise at their master sitting there, but although they whispered among themselves, they forebore to approach him. Warm and still was the radiance that flooded the valley as the sun sailed over the line of eastern hills; and presently Sita, the light falling upon her eyes, was awakened and went to her window to look out. She saw a flock of wild geese wheeling in the sun. She saw Jali talking to the garden boys who were showing him some kittens taken from a wild cat that had been shot the day before. A little later she saw Amar going down the path towards the lake. He had told her that he was crossing over to Daniyal's camp, having received an urgent summons from Mobarek, who had just returned there.

Whilst dressing with a happy, leisurely care, she went again and again to the window to smell the jasmine that blossomed just beneath the sill. And then it came into her mind that she possessed a tiny bottle of a very ancient essence distilled in Persia from the Five Flowers of Love. Her grandmother, who had given it to her, used to say that the flowers had to be plucked by the light of the full moon when it is as yellow as a jackal



and its nether rim still touches the horizon. This bottle she now unsealed, and from the thick amber drops there rose a perfume that was exquisite indeed, but which did not please her half so well as that blowing in upon the fresh air. Those amber drops breathed of loves dead and embalmed, of loves that had been young too many weary years ago. The moon since then had travelled too many weary leagues and seen too many lovers grow old and die. Then her thoughts turned to the poor dead Ranee. Not many weeks ago, as she was bending over a chest of precious silks, another perfume, very sweet but older and sadder yet, had floated up out of a past less far. The memory made her sigh; she put the stopper back into the bottle and went down into the garden. Jali was sitting on a bench overlooking the lake, but he did not seem to hear her when she called; and so, because it was still early, she lingered by the side of the lily-pond where she and Hari had stood together on that day. She recalled how the blue butterflies had been playing over the water, and how clear their reflections had been. Then she went on down the path and through the gate towards the group of tents, and all at once she found herself in the presence of Gokal. Heavy and unmoving as a statue he sat there with the cool, golden sunlight pouring over his white robe and gilding the pallor of his face. She faltered for an instant, for it almost seemed to her as if he was sitting there in the expectation of her coming. His eyes rested upon her with an indecipherable tranquillity, and the idea of accounting for this early visit of hers vanished from her mind. She stood before him in silence and returned his gaze. If he could see into her heart, if he could pierce her

outward calm and see the fountains of radiance within, it was well. By him she had the wish to be known fully.

They sat together for a while; and presently, although the words they exchanged were without significance, she felt that he was aware of what she would have him know. But this did not bring him back from his remoteness. His eyes resting upon the lake, his face set in a stony calm, he looked like the sculptured image of himself, and his spirit seemed to be communicating with her from another sphere.

After a space they fell silent, and then she rose quietly and stood before him once more.

‘Is Hari still sleeping?’ she asked.

‘Yes, he must be still asleep. When he comes, what shall I say?’

‘Tell him to join me up there.’ Her gaze was fixed upon the wooded knoll behind the house. ‘He will know where to find me.’

*This story will be continued in another volume which will appear next year under the title of “The Root and The Flower.”*



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